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# THE FIRE AND THE RAIN

GIRISH KARNAD

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*The Fire and the Rain*

# *The Fire and the Rain*

*Girish Karnad*

## Agni Mattu Malé

*A play translated from the Kannada by the author*

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*Dedicated to the memory of*
*G.B. Joshi*
*Manohara Grantha Mala, Dharwad*
*who against all odds published my first play*

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# *Preface*

The myth of Yavakri (or Yavakrita) occurs in Chapters 135–38 of the Vana Parva (Forest Canto) of the *Mahabharata*. It is narrated by the ascetic Lomasha to the Pandavas as they wander across the land during their exile. I have met Sanskrit scholars who were unaware of the existence of the myth: it is easy to lose track of a short narrative like this in the tangled undergrowth that covers the floor of that epic.

I first came across the story of Yavakri and Paravasu, while still in college, in C. Rajagopalachari's abridgment of the *Mahabharata*.[1] That Rajaji, confronted with the stupendous task of abridging the world's longest epic to about four hundred pages, should not have discarded this seemingly peripheral tale is a tribute to his sensitivity and judgement.

It was fortunate for me that Rajaji did not do so, for the moment I read the tale, I knew it had to be turned into a play. For the next thirty-seven years, I struggled with it, trying to fit all the ramifications of the myth within some sort of a manageable shape.

What literally forced my hand was a commission, in 1993, from the Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, USA, to write a play for them. In October 1994, a workshop was organized in Minneapolis in which I worked with professional American actors at making the script stageworthy: My grateful thanks are therefore due to Garland Wright, Artistic Director of the Theater (who also directed my play, *Nāga-Mandala*[2]), Madeline Puzo, who supervised the entire enterprise and Sumitra Mukherjee, who started it all by introducing my work to them. Barbara Field, with her sensitivity to nuances of another culture, commitment to theatre and pragmatic good sense proved an excellent dramaturge at the workshop and has continued to be a close and valued friend. The actors could not have been more understanding and co-operative in

[1] C. Rajagopalachari: *Mahabharata*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan (Bombay, 1951).

[2] Oxford University Press, 1990.

helping me reshape the text, but I should like to mention Amy Kane who brought such sympathy and understanding to the character of Nittilai.

While writing the play, I tried the patience of innumerable pundits, friends and scholars. I should particularly like to acknowledge my debt to Vidyalankara Professor S.K. Ramachandra Rao who analysed the story for me word by word; my guru, Mahamahopadhyaya Professor K.T. Pandurangi, to whom I turned again and again for guidance; Professor Ramachandra Gandhi who read the manuscript and criticized it and finally Shri Arunacharya Katti of Dharwad, a practising purohit, who explained to me what a 'yajña' feels like from the 'inside' to a practitioner. My thanks are also due to Professor Sheldon Pollock of the University of Chicago, Professor Heidrun Brückner of Tübingen University and Shri Suresh Awasthi, former secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, for drawing my attention to some important publications on yajña and 'natya'.

Bangalore
1998

GIRISH KARNAD

# *Characters*

*(In the order of their appearance)*

THE KING

PARAVASU (*the Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice*)

THE PRIESTS

THE BRAHMA RAKSHASA (*a demon soul*)

THE COURTIER

THE ACTOR-MANAGER

ARVASU (*Paravasu's younger brother*)

THE ACTOR-MANAGER'S BROTHER

NITTILAI (*a hunter girl*)

ANDHAKA (*a blind man, Yavakri's servant*)

VISHAKHA (*Paravasu's wife*)

YAVAKRI (*Paravasu's cousin*)

RAIBHYA (*Paravasu's father*)

NITTILAI'S BROTHER

NITTILAI'S HUSBAND

INDRA (*the King of Gods*)

CROWDS, GUARDS, etc.

# *Prologue*

*(It has not rained adequately for nearly ten years. Drought grips the land. A seven-year long fire sacrifice (yajña) is being held to propitiate Indra, the god of rains.*

*Fire burns at the centre of step-like brick altars. There are several such altars, at all of which priests are offering oblations to the fire, while singing the prescribed hymns in unison.*

*The priests are all dressed in long flowing seamless pieces of cloth, and wear sacred threads. The king, who is the host, is similarly dressed but has his head covered.*

*Paravasu is the conducting priest (adhvaryu). He will be called the Chief Priest, since he is the most important of them all. It is his responsibility to see that there are no errors, either of omission or of commission, in the performance of the sacrifice. He is about twenty-eight.*

*It is an impressive panorama.*

*The Brahma Rakshasa, a Brahmin soul trapped in the limbo between death and rebirth, is moving around at the sacrificial precincts, though no human eye can see him.*

*The afternoon session is over. The priests begin to disperse.*

*A Courtier enters with the Actor-Manager. The latter is made to stand at a distance from the fire sacrifice since as an actor he is considered low-born. The Courtier rushes into the protected enclosure of the fire sacrifice and talks to the King. The priests surround them. There is heated discussion.)*

KING: (*Explodes.*) No, impossible! It's not possible.

PRIEST ONE: But where is the troupe?

COURTIER: At the city gates. Waiting.

PRIEST TWO: Let them come, Your Majesty. Please —

KING: I am not stopping them. They can come, by all means.
But I won't have that boy —

PRIEST THREE: It's three years since we saw a play.

PRIEST FOUR: And there was a time when we had four plays a month!

PRIEST THREE: These endless philosophical discussions, metaphysical speculations, debates. Every day! Surely, a sacrifice doesn't have to be so dreary.

PRIEST TWO: We need a play to freshen our minds.

PRIEST ONE: Fortunately this troupe is here —

PRIEST FOUR: Do let them perform, Your Majesty.

KING: But why do they insist on him? He is not even an actor by birth —

COURTIER: The Manager says all his actors have fled to other lands. He needs an actor. And this one, he says, is good —

KING: But the Chief Priest won't agree.

PRIEST ONE: Why don't we ask him?

*(Calls out.)*

Sir —

PARAVASU: *(Entering.)* Did someone call me?

KING: *(To Courtier.)* You tell him.

COURTIER: Well, sir . . . it's like this. There's a troupe of actors at the city gates. They are keen to stage a play in honour of the fire sacrifice.

PARAVASU: I thought the famine had decimated all the troupes.

COURTIER: That's precisely it. This one has come specially for us — against all odds.

*(Points to the Actor-Manager.)*

That's the Manager of the troupe. He has come with a specific plea. He'll make his submission from a distance.

*(Paravasu nods. The Courtier shouts to the Actor-Manager.)*

You may shout out whatever you have to say, but please face away from the sacrificial enclosure so you don't pollute it.

*(The Actor-Manager stands facing away from the sacrificial enclosure and declaims theatrically.)*

ACTOR-MANAGER: Sirs, as is well known to you, Brahma, the Lord of All Creation extracted the requisite elements from the four Vedas and combined them into a fifth Veda and thus gave birth to the art of Drama. He handed it over to his son, Lord Indra, the God of the Skies. Lord Indra, in turn, passed on the art to Bharata, a human being, for the gods cannot indulge in pretence. So if Indra is to be pleased and bring to an end this long drought which ravages our land a

fire sacrifice is not enough. A play has to be performed along with it. If we offer him entertainment in addition to the oblations, the god may grant us the rains we're praying for.

(*Long pause.*)

PARAVASU: Surely you don't need me to decide on this?

COURTIER: (*Hesitating.*) The problem is . . . there aren't enough actors to stage a play. They want to bring a new actor with them. (*Pause.*) Your brother.

PARAVASU: (*Quietly.*) Arvasu!

COURTIER: (*Hurriedly.*) I told the Actor-Manager, 'Anyone but him! He's forbidden to step in here!' But the Manager says there's no play without him. Not enough of a cast!

KING: They are twisting our arms. They know the priests are desperate for some entertainment.

(*A long pause. Paravasu is silent. The priests anxiously wait for his reaction.*)

COURTIER: The Manager says that he has a special message from your brother for you. He will repeat it if permitted to do so. Your brother has taught him what to say. The exact words.

(*Paravasu nods.*)

KING: (*Anxious.*) Is that all right with you? I mean — everyone will hear.

PARAVASU: And why shouldn't they?

COURTIER: (*Shouts to the Actor-Manager.*) If you have anything to add, you may do so.

ACTOR-MANAGER: A message from a brother: Dear elder brother, you once said to me: 'The sons of Bharata were the first actors in the history of theatre. They were Brahmins, but lost their caste because of their profession. A curse plunged them into disrepute and disgrace. If one values one's high birth, one should not touch this profession.' And I accepted this. But today I am a criminal. I have killed my father, a noble Brahmin. I already stand tarnished. I may now become an actor. This follows from your own words. So please do not bar the way now.

(*A long pause. Everyone looks eagerly at Paravasu.*)

KING: The fire sacrifice is nearing completion. We have conducted it without a blemish for nearly seven years. And you

have guided us. Let's just complete it. Let it rain. Once it rains, we can have as many plays as we like. As a sacrifice approaches completion, demons gather in the shadows. The danger of disruption increases. You said so yourself. To permit a condemned criminal in the vicinity of our sacrificial fires, to risk — at this stage —

PARAVASU: Perhaps the sacrifice needs danger.

KING: But you drove him away yourself. You called him a demon.

PARAVASU: Perhaps you can't keep demons away from the sacrifice. It's a bond we can't break. Let's have the play. We shall all watch.

*(The Courtier bows, runs to the Actor-Manager, who nods enthusiastically. They depart. The priests disperse discussing the play.*

*The troupe comes on stage: It consists of only three men, the Actor-Manager, his brother, who is limping, and Arvasu, Paravasu's brother, aged about eighteen. They all carry bundles of costumes. Arvasu is also carrying a mask. A couple of women provide music, with a few wind-instruments and a drum.*

*The King, Paravasu and the other priests sit in front. Behind them gathers the general populace.*

*The Actor-Manager starts singing the benedictory verse. The stage darkens, leaving Arvasu in a pool of light.)*

ARVASU: He's agreed, Nittilai! He'll be there to watch the play! But where are you? Why aren't you here? Nittilai! Nittilai! I am going to act on stage! I hope you are watching. Please, please, watch. The play is about to begin. Yes, after all these years, it's going to happen. But you know, and brother knows, and I know that this isn't the real thing. This is a fiction, borrowed from the myths. The real play began somewhere else. A month ago. A month? . . . Was it really that recent? It seems ages and ages of darkness ago. You and I were going to get married. Begin a new life. And I had to meet the elders of your tribe.

*(Nittilai, a girl of fourteen, comes and stands next to Arvasu. Though they are obviously fond of each other, they do not touch, except when specified.)*

# *Act One*

NITTILAI: Oh! Don't go on about it! I told you! There's nothing to worry about. The elders will gather under the big banyan tree and ask a few questions. You answer them . . .

ARVASU: I couldn't sleep a wink last night. Woke up in a cold sweat every time I thought of your elders . . .

NITTILAI: You are a fuss-pot. You've known them for years. And after all, every young man about to get married goes through it. Just declare —

ARVASU: Yes, I know. I know: Just stand there and say: 'I want to take her as my wife. I am potent. I can satisfy all her needs . . .'

NITTILAI: (*Shyly.*) Yes, more or less, that!

ARVASU: And in public!

NITTILAI: Of course. What's the point of saying it to yourself? (*Laughs.*) Don't worry. It's nothing . . .

ARVASU: Nothing, yes. For the young men of your tribe! But I am a Brahmin. To say all that in plain, loud words to a smirking, nudging, surging multitude. No hymns to drown out one's voice. No smoke to hide behind. It's dreadful. I hope there won't be too many people there —

NITTILAI: The whole village will be there. (*Arvasu groans.*) And some from the neighbouring villages.

ARVASU: Are the elders brutal?

NITTILAI: Of course not. But the young men could be —

ARVASU: What young men?

NITTILAI: Your friends. My brothers. Others attending the council. They have a field day usually.

ARVASU: I am not coming!

NITTILAI: Let no evil spirit hear you. Don't be silly, Arvasu. Father has told the young men not to get carried away. He likes you. In any case, there are very few men left because

of the famine. The women will be there of course. In hordes. It's not often that they get a Brahmin groom —

ARVASU: To chew upon, you mean? Your women can be more lewd than your men.

NITTILAI: It's their prerogative. Come on now, you keep bragging about how, given a chance, you could stun thousands with your wit and eloquence.

ARVASU: I was talking as an actor. But this is real — me as myself.

NITTILAI: Yes.

*(Pause.)*

And have you faced your own people? Told them yet?

*(No reply.)*

You haven't, have you? Do you feel ashamed?

ARVASU: Ashamed? Let me show you — here!

*(Grabs her hands and pulls her near.)*

NITTILAI: *(Scandalized.)* Let go of me! Let me go! What'll everyone say?

ARVASU: Why? Don't I have my rights — ?

NITTILAI: Not until we're married. Until then the girl is not supposed to touch her husband-to-be. That's our custom —

ARVASU: Mother of mine! I'm about to jettison my caste, my people, my whole past for you. Can't you forget a minor custom for my sake?

NITTILAI: It's a nice custom. Sensible. Worth observing.

ARVASU: All these days I couldn't touch you because Brahmins don't touch other castes. Now you can't touch me because among hunters, girls don't touch their betrothed. Are you sure someone won't think of something else once we're married?

*(She stops him and points. They are at some distance from the hermitage of Yavakri's father. A blind man, called Andhaka, who is a Sudra by caste, is sitting by the gate. Arvasu nods, signals to her to watch. Then proceeds toward the hermitage, moving zig-zag, trying to camouflage his walk.)*

ANDHAKA: Who's that? Arvasu?

*(Nittilai doubles up with laughter. Arvasu jumps up and down in mock frustration, but is actually quite annoyed with himself.)*

ARVASU: Curse your ears! *Curse your ears*!

NITTILAI: (*To Andhaka.*) He was trying to walk so you wouldn't guess who it was.

ANDHAKA: They all try that. But I can always tell. Just as you can recognize a man by his face — I can recognize him by the sound of his steps —

ARVASU: I'll fool you yet, old man!

ANDHAKA: I wish you luck. But in the meantime you two have cheered my heart, children. Made my ears happy . . .

NITTILAI: You mean you already know?

ARVASU: We thought we'd surprise you.

NITTILAI: You never move out of here. Yet you hear of every-thing . . .

ANDHAKA: You two are brave. It's one thing to frolic together as children. But you're not children any longer. You're old enough to know that the world can be cruel and ruthless.

NITTILAI: Even now he hasn't told his family.

ANDHAKA: Fair enough! 'You must always extract the honey without ruffling the bees.'

ARVASU: I keep telling her, no one cares! The one advantage of this famine —

NITTILAI: Don't say that! That's not nice —

ARVASU: I know. Nevertheless. The famine has sent my relatives fleeing to the city. The last thing they want is to send a daughter back to this cursed land. So they couldn't care less whom I marry —

ANDHAKA: (*Not unkindly.*) Besides — you're not known to be bright. You are not in demand. That's an advantage.

(*Arvasu makes a wry face. Nittilai giggles silently.*)

ARVASU: Actually, I did have some moments of panic. But then the other day as I sat thinking —

(*For Andhaka's benefit.*)

'trying hard' to think, if you like — it suddenly occurred to me how stupid I was being. I'll never be learned like father or uncle. I shan't ever conduct the royal sacrifice like Paravasu or perform penance like cousin Yavakri. All I want is to dance and sing and act. And be with Nittilai. It doesn't matter a flake of cowdung to my father whether I'm alive or dead.

My sister-in-law lives wrapped up in a world of her own. That leaves only my brother —

ANDHAKA: A hard man . . . who will not be crossed . . .

ARVASU: Hard? Never to me. To me he's been a mother, father, brother, nurse, teacher — everything rolled into one. He who taught me to win at marbles and play tunes on reeds. I owe everything to him —

ANDHAKA: And what if he forbids you now?

ARVASU: I'll tell him: 'I can't give up Nittilai. She is my life. I can't live without her — I would rather be an outcaste — '

ANDHAKA: Beautiful! Beautiful! Such moving words.

(*Nittilai laughs happily.*)

But Paravasu is not one to be easily moved, I warn you.

ARVASU: You'll see. The only reason I haven't told him yet is that the sacrifice is about to end. And he *is* the Chief Priest. It's important that he is not disturbed —

(*Nittilai nods in agreement.*)

ANDHAKA: But surely he'll hear about your meeting with her tribal elders this afternoon?

ARVASU: How was I to know her father would call this Council so suddenly? He never asked me.

NITTILAI: So Father's to blame? Do you know why Father called the elders in such haste? He always says: 'These high-caste men are glad enough to bed our women but not to wed them.'

ARVASU: All right! Now I'll wed you so you can —

NITTILAI: (*Screams.*) Shut up!

(*They all laugh.*)

ANDHAKA: Your cousin Yavakri will be so happy —

ARVASU: Is he in?

ANDHAKA: No. In fact he said he was heading in the direction of your hermitage.

ARVASU: We are on our way there too. He's sent word asking me to meet him there.

NITTILAI: It would have been so convenient if you could have finished talking to him here. We could have gone directly to our village —

ANDHAKA: Yavakri gets no peace here. It's this endless stream of

visitors. Morning to night. Ceaseless. Learned men, ascetics, pundits, all dying to find out how he talked to the god . . . What Lord Indra said . . . the details of his austerities . . . what hymns he chanted . . .

ARVASU: (*To Nittilai.*) You see? It's no small matter. Don't joke about it . . .

ANDHAKA: She joked about it? What did she say?

(*Nittilai glares at Arvasu as though to say, 'There! You've done it!' Andhaka is getting more and more agitated.*)

Speak up, child. You joked about what?

NITTILAI: I only said I didn't know why Yavakri had to spend ten years in the jungle —

ANDHAKA: He was seeking God so he could ask for Universal Knowledge?! And gods don't yield to men so easily. He had to mortify himself, practise austerities, fast, meditate, pray.

NITTILAI: I know but —

ANDHAKA: Ten years of rigorous penance. And still Lord Indra would not oblige. Finally, Yavakri stood in the middle of a circle of fire and started offering his limbs to the fire — first his fingers, then his eyes, then his entrails, his tongue, and at last, his heart — that's when the god appeared to him, restored him limbs, and granted him the boon.

NITTILAI: (*Simply, with no offence meant.*) Did he tell you all this, Grandfather?

ARVASU: Don't be silly. A man of his stature wouldn't talk about himself —

NITTILAI: Then how does everyone know what happened in a remote corner of the jungle — miles away from the nearest prying eye?

ANDHAKA: Every Brahmin on the face of this earth wants to gain spiritual powers. But few succeed. In my lifetime I have known only two who did. Your uncle and your father, Arvasu. But they got their knowledge from human gurus. By diligent study. Yavakri has gone beyond even them. He received his knowledge from the gods, direct! Your uncle was sure he would fail. How he tried to dissuade the boy from taking on this ordeal. But I said to him, 'Master, let him go to the jungle. You don't know your son. I do. I

brought him up on this lap of mine. He will succeed in anything he tries, you mark my words!' If my Master had listened to me, he would be alive today. But he died of a broken heart.

(*Pause.*)

I waited. Right here. For ten years. I took care of this hermitage for the day when my Yavakri would return home. And now he has come back. In triumph. The whole world is at his feet.

NITTILAI: But what I want to know is why are the Brahmins so secretive about everything?

ARVASU: Oh God! She's got into one of her argumentative moods!

(*Walks off a little distance. Stands concentrating.*)

NITTILAI: (*Continuing.*) You know, their fire sacrifices are conducted in covered enclosures. They mortify themselves in the dark of the jungle. Even their gods appear so secretly. Why? What are they afraid of? Look at my people. Everything is done in public view there. The priest announces that he'll invoke the deity at such and such a time on such and such a day. And then there, right in front of the whole tribe, he gets possessed. And the spirit answers your questions. You can feel it come and go. You *know* it's there. Not mere hearsay —

ANDHAKA: Take care, child. The gods that their priests seek are far mightier than yours. Don't talk of the two in the same breath.

NITTILAI: My point is since Lord Indra appeared to Yavakri and Indra is their God of Rains, why didn't Yavakri ask for a couple of good showers? You should see the region around our village. Parched. Every morning, women with babes on their hips, shrunken children, shrivelled old men and women gather in front of my father's house — for the gruel he distributes. No young people. They have all disappeared! And Father says all the land needs is a couple of heavy downpours. That'll revive the earth. Not too much to ask of a god, is it?

ANDHAKA: (*Half agreeing.*) But they say that such powers

shouldn't be used to solve day-to-day problems. They are meant to lead one to — to — inner knowledge.

NITTILAI: What's that?

ANDHAKA: I don't know. That's what Yavakri's father used to say.

NITTILAI: Then what's the use of all these powers?

ANDHAKA: Ask Yavakri, when you meet him. He won't mind. In fact, he'll like it. He's a gentle soul.

NITTILAI: Actually, I want to ask Yavakri *two* questions. Can he make it rain? And then, can he tell when he is going to die? . . . Just two. What is the point of any knowledge, if you can't save dying children and if you can't predict your moment of death.

ARVASU: (*From far.*) Now, guess what animal this is!

NITTILAI: He can't think of anything else!

(*But closes her eyes and listens.*)

All right.

(*Arvasu charges, pretending to be a wild animal.*)

ANDHAKA: (*Listens.*) A wild horse . . . No! A boar? I know. A bison!

NITTILAI: Yes. A bison. That was good.

ARVASU: (*Ecstatic.*) Triumph! They say one shouldn't imitate! One should embody the essence. Only the essence! It means I have captured the essence of a bison —

NITTILAI: You don't need to try. You were born with it.

ARVASU: That's why the hunters love me!

(*They all laugh.*)

NITTILAI: Let's go.

ANDHAKA: Wait, child. I know you're restless to reach your village. But Yavakri wants you to meet him when the sun's overhead, doesn't he?

ARVASU: 'Exactly.' . . . I don't know why. But his message said 'exactly'. Neither earlier. Nor later. Exactly when the sun's overhead . . .

ANDHAKA: So you've time. Stay and chat. Listening to you makes me feel happy.

ARVASU: The question is how do you capture the essence of the gods in your footsteps, since a god's feet never touch the earth?

*(The stage darkens.*

*Lights come up in another part of the stage, representing the hermitage of Raibhya, father of Arvasu. Vishakha, aged about twenty-six, is filling water in a metal urn. She has scooped out water from holes dug in the wet sand and collected it in the pot. She must have been an attractive person once, but now looks angry and haggard. She looks around furtively. There's no one around. She picks up the pot, puts it on her waist and starts for home. Yavakri is standing right in the middle of her path. She stops but avoids looking at him. A long pause.)*

VISHAKHA: *(Without looking at him.)* Please . . .

YAVAKRI: At last, a word! After waiting for four days — I practically had to wrench it out of you by blocking your path.

*(As he moves aside and sits down on a rock, she takes a few steps towards her house.)*

Stay, Vishakha — Please. There's no one there in your house. Your father-in-law has gone out. Your brother-in-law is never home. What's the hurry?

VISHAKHA: My father-in-law will be back tomorrow. Speak to him then.

YAVAKRI: It's not the need to speak to him that brings me here.

VISHAKHA: I can't stay here chatting with a stranger.

YAVAKRI: A stranger!

*(Laughs.)*

That's good.

VISHAKHA: I am a married woman.

YAVAKRI: I know you are. The first piece of news to greet me on my return was that you had married Paravasu. And I was shattered. But it was silly of me not to have expected it. Ten years is a long time. Ten years of silence is longer still. Can't we just talk?

*(Pause.)*

Ten years ago I swore to you that I would not look at another woman. I kept my word.

VISHAKHA: That's over and done with now.

YAVAKRI: Don't think I regret it. No, not for a moment. But doesn't that give me some right to say: 'Please put the pot down for a few minutes and talk to me?'

(*Vishakha makes a move to go.*)

Vishakha, after ten years in solitude, I am hungry for words.

(*Startled, Vishakha looks up at him for the first time.*)

VISHAKHA: They say that pleased with your rigorous penance, Lord Indra has granted you Universal Knowledge. I don't feel equal to the task of —

YAVAKRI: Universal Knowledge! What a phrase! It makes me laugh now. But do you know it was in order to win some such grandiose prize that I went into the jungle? You put it so simply in that one sentence. So beautifully. You go into the jungle. You perform austerities in the name of some god. You stand in a circle of fire. The pressure of your austerities forces the god to grant you your wish. And you get 'Universal Knowledge.' Victory!

(*Pause.*)

It wasn't at all like that, you know.

VISHAKHA: (*Gently.*) Why?

YAVAKRI: For a start, life in the jungle is sheer hell. Flies, giant ants, beetles, pests, leeches attacking at the suspicion of moisture, vipers lurking in bowls of dust. The relentless heat. Not demons but mosquitoes to torture you —

VISHAKHA: Perhaps that's how the gods test one.

YAVAKRI: One would expect the appearance of a god to be a shattering experience. Concrete. Indubitable. Almost physical. But though I think Indra came to me several times, I was never certain. The first time he appeared he said, 'No, Yavakri, you can't master knowledge through austerities. It must come with experience. Knowledge is time. It is space. You must move through these dimensions.' I said, 'No, I must have it. Grant me all knowledge.' He laughed and said: 'You are being silly.' That's it! Common dialogue. Not very profound. And when the god disappeared, nothing was left behind to prove he had ever been there. I looked around. The same old black scorpion. The same horned chameleon. The shower of bird-shit around me. So was it all a hallucination caused by something I'd eaten that morning? Or was it fever working on my brain? So I go on. Another year. Or perhaps two. Then the god comes again. 'Why are you being

so stubborn?' he chides. 'You can't cross a full stream on a bridge of sand.' I insist that my demands are met — another trite exchange of words —

VISHAKHA: But you did win in the end?

YAVAKRI: Yes, one day I decided I had won. So I have come back. I have no clear recollection how I arrived at that conclusion.

(*Laughs.*)

Some knowledge, but probably little wisdom. I know now what *can't* be achieved. That itself is wisdom, isn't it? But I mustn't complain. I think I have some mystical powers I hadn't before. Mastered a few secret arts. Got a few mantras at my finger-tips. You'll see for yourself soon —

VISHAKHA: Me? No, thank you.

YAVAKRI: The strangest thing however is that I've discovered a corner within me — left untouched by those ten years! Undisturbed by all that self-lashing! So if you feel insulted by what I am going to tell you, go away. I won't see you again. In that case, let these be the last words I speak to you.

(*Pause.*)

The day I decided my penance was over I fell down in a dead faint. I don't know how long I was in that state. It was terrible exhaustion, the pain of sheer relief. And when I opened my eyes, do you know the first thing that I thought of? Ten years ago I had come to your house to bid you goodbye. And you led me quickly to the jack-fruit grove behind your house. You opened the knot of your blouse, pressed my face to your breasts, then turned and fled. I stood there stunned. The trees were loaded with fruit. Many were ripe and had split open and the rich golden segments poured out. The sweet sick smell of the jack-fruit, the maddening hum of a fly. The smell of your body. Ten years later I opened my eyes and I knew I was hungry for that moment.

VISHAKHA: I can't believe it! The whole world may be singing your praises. But you haven't grown up! These ten years have not made any difference to your teenage fantasies. That's all gone, Yavakri. Indra may be immortal. But . . . my breasts hang loose now.

(*Laughs.*)

YAVAKRI: Why are you laughing?

VISHAKHA: I have been trembling at the sight of you these last three days. Now, I only feel sorry.

YAVAKRI: Good. I told you you could go home if you were angry. But you are not angry. My tale only makes you feel sorry for me. So you can stay?

VISHAKHA: The moment I heard you say you were hungry for words, I knew it was too late to go. I couldn't walk out on you after that. I had lost the initiative — missed the moment of decision. Because I know that hunger well, Yavakri. That's why I should have gone back without saying a word to you.

YAVAKRI: Don't go, Vishakha!

VISHAKHA: Have I gone? I am still here. You are a fool, Yavakri. And you talk like one.

(*Yavakri goes to her. There's a pause. She looks at him steadily, smiling. He embraces her. She pushes him away, puts the pot down on the ground.*)

YAVAKRI: You want to hit me? Go ahead —

VISHAKHA: It's not you I am worried about. It's the water. I have dug it out like precious gold . . . You are hungry for words. And so am I. So let's talk. Sit down.

YAVAKRI: You and Indra. That's right. The presiding deities of my life. It's because of you two that I have avoided women altogether until now. Conserved my seed like you conserve your water. Now as I sit in front of you, I want to betray Indra — he left me ignorant . . .

VISHAKHA: They say Indra has a thousand eyes.

(*Laughs.*)

He could have opened at least one for you.

(*Yavakri tries to kiss her.*)

YAVAKRI: Shush now.

VISHAKHA: What do you mean 'Shush'? What you have done is to rekindle my need to talk. I thought it was dead and gone. Gently! Don't rush. Oh, Yavakri! The pleasure of calling someone a fool. Of the desire welling up inside one to protect him. I live in this hermitage, parched and wordless, like a she-devil. And words are like water — precious. I was afraid

to bathe. Now I want to drown. Listen to me. You went away. I was married off —

YAVAKRI: Your father must have felt relieved that I went away. Paravasu was a better match. I was only his miserable cousin.

VISHAKHA: Yes, Father was happy. I was married off to Paravasu. I didn't want to, but that didn't matter. The night of the wedding, my husband said to me: 'I know you didn't want to marry me. But don't worry. I'll make you happy for a year.' And he did. Exactly for one year. He plunged me into a kind of bliss I didn't know existed. It was heaven — here and now — at the tip of all my senses. Then on the first day of the second year of our marriage, he said: 'Enough of that. We now start on our search.' And then — it wasn't that I was not happy. But the question of happiness receded into the background. He used my body, and his own body, like an experimenter, an explorer. As instruments in a search. Search for what? I never knew. But I knew he knew. Nothing was too shameful, too degrading, even too painful. Shame died in me. And I yielded. I let my body be turned inside out as he did his own. I had a sense he was leading me to something. Mystical? Spiritual? We never talked. Only the sense pervaded the air. You're still lost in the fragrance of the jack-fruit, Yavakri. I have known what it is to grow heavy, burst open, drip and rot, to fill the world with one's innards. Then one day he received the invitation from the King. To be the Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice. And he left. The site of the fire sacrifice is only a couple of hours away from here. But in all these seven years he hasn't come back. I know he can't. But I look forward to having him home once the seven years are over. Alone, I have become dry like tinder. Ready to burst into flames at a breath. To burn things around me down at the slightest chance —

YAVAKRI: (*Looks up.*) Soon the sun will be overhead.

VISHAKHA: My husband and you! He left no pore in my body alone. And you — you think a woman is only a pair of half-formed breasts.

YAVAKRI: Enough now.

VISHAKHA: I'll give you the knowledge Indra couldn't give you. My body — it's light with speech now.

*(They go behind a dry champak tree on the bank. Long pause. Nittilai and Arvasu enter.)*

NITTILAI: He's going to settle down here now, isn't he? So why can't you see him tomorrow? Surely a day isn't going to make a difference. If we are late, the elders will be angry with us and . . .

ARVASU: Let's give him five minutes. That's all, Nittilai. Please. You know there's always been a lot of bitterness between us cousins. Verging on hatred. Now he's made the gesture of asking me to meet him. Let me reciprocate. I'll touch his feet. Ask for his blessings. Then we go on.

NITTILAI: All right. But there's no one here. I hope he doesn't make us wait.

*(Goes toward the stream. Stops. Suddenly she is transformed, from an innocent young girl into a consummate huntress. Silently, she beckons Arvasu. He goes near her. She points to something in the dry bed of the river. It is Vishakha's pot.)*

ARVASU: *(In a low voice.)* Our water pot! What's it doing here? Has sister-in-law forgotten to take it back?

NITTILAI: No one leaves a full pot of water behind.

ARVASU: That's true.

*(Scared.)*

They say a panther has strayed into these parts. If he was thirsty and —

NITTILAI: *(Inspects the river bed.)* No. Tracks of the barking deer. A couple of porcupines. A family of mongooses. No sign of a panther — or anything that big — not within the last three days.

ARVASU: *(Picks up a stick.)* Shall I go in and see?

NITTILAI: *(Smiles at the sight of the stick.)* No need. It's all here. Those footprints are obviously your sister-in-law's. She didn't drop the pot. She set in down, carefully. So as not to spill the water. And then —

*(She freezes. Stares at the ground. Looks in the direction in which Vishakha and Yavakri have gone.)*

NITTILAI: Is your brother back?

ARVASU: Paravasu? Of course not. He can't leave the sacrifice —

NITTILAI: (*Gets up.*) Come, Arvasu. Let's go.

ARVASU: Where?

NITTILAI: Let's go. Please. To my village.

ARVASU: And leave sister-in-law to her fate? —

NITTILAI: Listen to me. Nothing's happened to her.

ARVASU: I can't do that! I must know — I'll be back in a minute —

*(He goes behind the champak tree into the bushes. Suddenly exclamations, etc. Arvasu rushes out, followed by Vishakha. Her clothes are torn. Her back is covered with mud. She runs to the hermitage without even glancing at Nittilai. Arvasu stares uncomprehending. Then he sees the pot. Lifts it to his shoulder.)*

I'd better take it home. I'll be back —

*(She nods. At this moment Yavakri steps out. He picks up a small metal pot with a snout and a handle — called a kaṃandalu — which he has hidden behind a tree. He looks at the two, calmly walks to Arvasu, tips the pot on his shoulder to fill his kamandalu. Arvasu watches helplessly.)*

NITTILAI: (*Angry.*) Some people put the treacherous viper to shame.

YAVAKRI: (*Turns to her.*) Aren't you the whelp who was asking my old servant if I knew my moment of death?

NITTILAI: (*Taken aback.*) How did you know that?

YAVAKRI: (*Ignoring her question.*) I don't know when I'll die. But I promise you this — you'll be dead within the month.

(*Nittilai recoils, shocked.*)

NITTILAI: Oh — I — I'm going home —

ARVASU: Nittilai — wait — I'll follow you —

*(But she disappears. He, with the pot on his shoulder, stands unable to follow.)*

YAVAKRI: (*Calmly.*) And you, Arvasu, you'll find me under the baṇyan tree, next to the black cliff.

*(Exits. Arvasu, confused, walks to his father's hermitage.*

*Vishakha has gone to the hermitage ahead of Arvasu. She is about to enter the house when her father-in-law, Raibhya, steps out. He is thin and emaciated, but physically active. Vishakha is horrified to see him. He scowls at her.)*

RAIBHYA: Where were you all this while?

VISHAKHA: I — I'd gone — to fetch water.

(*She has no pot with her.*)

RAIBHYA: Really?

(*Arvasu comes in with the pot of water and is startled to see Raibhya.*)

ARVASU: Father! I didn't know you were returning home today —

RAIBHYA: I didn't either. But perhaps I should give the two of you more such surprises.

(*Arvasu puts the pot down in a corner and retreats.*)

RAIBHYA: Wait!

(*To Vishakha.*)

You go to fetch water. And your brother-in-law carries it back for you. Strange! What *is* happening here? Why are you so filthy? You look like a buffalo that's been rolling in mud.

VISHAKHA: I suddenly felt faint. And fell down.

RAIBHYA: And he turned up, just at that moment to help you! Isn't that convenient! And you two have been taking a long time for just that — what were you up to?

ARVASU: (*Hurriedly.*) Nittilai was there too —

RAIBHYA: Who?

ARVASU: Nittilai. The hunter girl.

RAIBHYA: A savage! Was there anybody else?

(*Arvasu, taken unawares by the question, looks at Vishakha. Raibhya notices the look.*)

RAIBHYA: So there *was* someone else there, wasn't there? Who was it?

ARVASU: (*Finds it hard to lie.*) No one, Father. Nittilai and I went there —

RAIBHYA: (*Pointing to Vishakha.*) Was she alone? Or was there anybody else with her?

ARVASU: No, there was no one else. She was feeling faint — and fell down — so I helped her. I must go —

RAIBHYA: You want to run away, do you? All right. Go. But where will she go?

(*To Vishakha.*)

Tell me who was there. Tell me.

*(He grabs her by her hair and starts beating her. Kicks her. Arvasu can't bear to see it. He rushes to her help. Holds Raibhya back.)*

ARVASU: Stop it, Father. Please. Go away, Sister-in-law. Go — please —

RAIBHYA: Where can she go? I want the truth and I'll kill her if necessary. Let me go! I know how to handle her —

*(Struggles to get out of Arvasu's hold.)*

VISHAKHA: Let him go, Arvasu.

*(Calmly.)*

Yes, there was somebody else there. Yavakri! And he had come to see me. Alone.

*(Long pause. They stare at each other.)*

RAIBHYA: You whore — you roving whore! I could reduce you to ashes — turn you into a fistful of dust — with a simple curse. But let that husband of yours handle you. Paravasu, Chief Priest of the sacrifice! Let him clean up his own shit! Yavakri — So this is what ten years of austerities amount to! So be it. So Yavakri, now it's between you and me. Where's that pot of water? Bring it here —

VISHAKHA: No, please! Don't do anything to him. It's my fault. Please, don't harm Yavakri. I'm willing to face the consequences — punish me. Not him. Please.

RAIBHYA: Bring the water!

*(Raibhya sits cross-legged and sinks into deep meditation. Vishakha and Arvasu watch him horrified, fascinated. Raibhya opens his eyes. Suddenly, he is calm. There is no trace of anger in him.)*

RAIBHYA: Vishakha, go and tell your lover I accept his challenge. I shall invoke the 'kritya' and send a Brahma Rakshasa, a demon soul, after him. Let Yavakri save himself. He need only go and hide in his father's hermitage. I loved my brother and will not desecrate his altar. Let Yavakri cower in there like a dog. If he steps out, he will be dead. Tell him this, too — that if he can manage to stay alive for another twenty-four hours, I, Raibhya, shall accept defeat and enter fire.

*(Sinks back into meditation.)*

VISHAKHA: *(Wakes up.)* Arvasu, we must warn Yavakri. Instantly. Go to your uncle's hermitage.

ARVASU: But Yavakri said he would be under the banyan tree near the black cliff —

VISHAKHA: I'll run there. It's nearby. You go to the hermitage in case he's there —

ARVASU: But — but —

VISHAKHA: Run, please. I've never asked anything of you till now. Just this once. Go. Run.

*(They run in opposite directions. Raibhya opens his eyes, pulls out a strand of hair from his head and throws it to the ground. The Brahma Rakshasa appears. He is thin, almost naked and holds a trident. He runs in the direction of Yavakri as the lights fade out.*

*Andhaka, the blind man, is sitting at the gate of Yavakri's hermitage. He hears footsteps.)*

ANDHAKA: Ah, Arvasu!

*(Arvasu arrives.)*

Haven't you gone to the meeting —

ARVASU: I'm on my way. But has Yavakri come here?

ANDHAKA: Not since you and Nittilai left.

ARVASU: If he comes, tell him to stay inside the hermitage. Not to step out. Don't let him even peep out. His life's in danger.

ANDHAKA: What? How?

ARVASU: You don't move from here either. Wait for him — you must warn him —

ANDHAKA: I will — but —

ARVASU: I have to go — Nittilai's waiting.

ANDHAKA: Listen, boy —

*(Arvasu runs away. Andhaka sits down, all ears.*

*Vishakha arrives at the banyan tree next to the black cliff. Yavakri is murmuring incantations, sitting cross-legged, with his kamandalu in front of him. Vishakha runs in, panting, sweating profusely and heaves a sigh of relief when she sees Yavakri. He briefly looks at her, nods encouragingly and carries on meditating.)*

VISHAKHA: You mustn't stay here, Yavakri. Go to your father's hermitage. Immediately. Please!

*(No reply.)*

My father-in-law has found out everything — and he is bent on destroying you.

(*Pause.*)

Yavakri, he is calling up the kritya —

YAVAKRI: He is? I am flattered. To invoke the kritya spell is to engage one's full powers. That he should choose this instrument of death for me, it's certainly an honour.

VISHAKHA: Go to your place, Yavakri. Father-in-law said you would be safe there. Please. Hurry.

YAVAKRI: Don't be afraid, Vishakha, I was expecting something like this. You see this water . . . I have consecrated it.

(*He points to the water in the kamandalu.*)

A drop of this water. And the Brahma Rakshasa will become numb. Powerless. Uncle's entire threat will turn into a farce. You needn't have bothered — but now that you're here, stay and see for yourself.

VISHAKHA: But you don't need any of this. You only have to be in your father's hermitage — the Brahma Rakshasa can't touch you *there*! Once you are safe, I'll happily watch that living corpse burn —

YAVAKRI: Oh Vishakha! It's so wonderful to have you here. Because *you* used to console me — don't you remember — when we were young? I cried at the humiliations piled on my father. He was one of the most learned men in the land. Probably the most brilliant mind. But he was scorned while this unscrupulous brother of his grabbed all the honours.

VISHAKHA: Why are you bringing up all these grievances now, Yavakri? It's hardly the time —

YAVAKRI: Grievances! You don't even flatter me with the word 'hatred'. But it doesn't matter. What matters is that I hate your husband's family. My father deserved to be invited as the Chief Priest of the sacrifice. But that too went to Paravasu, your husband. Even in the midst of my austerities I wept when I heard the news. For I knew Father would refuse to take offence. I knew he would go and congratulate Paravasu on the honour, embrace and bless him —

VISHAKHA: Yes, he did that.

YAVAKRI: (*Enraged.*) Why? I hated him for it. *He* was one of the reasons I fled to the jungle.

VISHAKHA: Do we have to talk about it now? The past is gone.

YAVAKRI: The past *isn't* gone. It's here inside me. The time has come to show the world what my father's son is capable of. This is my moment.

VISHAKHA: But today your name's on every tongue in the land and they pronounce it with awe. Why do you need to —

YAVAKRI: The others don't matter, except as witnesses.

(*Looks out.*)

Where is that demon? Why is he late?

(*To Vishakha.*)

One night in the jungle, Indra came to me and said: 'You are ready now to receive knowledge. But knowledge involves control of passions, serenity, objectivity.' And I shouted back: 'No, that's not the knowledge I want. That's not knowledge. That's suicide! This obsession. This hatred. This venom. All this is me. I'll not deny anything of myself. I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive!'

VISHAKHA: If anything happens to you, I'll never forgive myself. Go, go to your home altar. Please.

YAVAKRI: (*Incensed.*) Don't you understand anything? You want me to run away after issuing my challenge?

VISHAKHA: Challenge?

YAVAKRI: Do you think all this happened accidentally? You think I would leave anything to chance? How do you think Arvasu happened to arrive at the river-bank at the right moment? Who called your father-in-law back?

VISHAKHA: (*Scared.*) Enough, Yavakri. Don't say anything more. I don't want to know. It's my fault. I shouldn't have yielded to you — I —

YAVAKRI: It was fortunate that you yielded. If you hadn't, I would have had to take you by force.

(*Vishakha stares at him in horror.*)

This is the moment toward which my entire life has rushed headlong. I will not let anything stand in its way. Your father-in-law will die, Vishakha. Let's see what your husband does then. Will he continue to hide like a bandicoot in his ritual world? Or will he commit sacrilege by stepping out to face me? Look, I am trembling. I am drenched in sweat. Because everything has worked out just right.

VISHAKHA: (*Under her breath.*) Oh, my God! . . . Yavakri!

YAVAKRI: Try to understand. They would have turned their backsides on me with contempt if I'd let them — as they did with Father! There was only one way to force them to confront me. Catch Paravasu by his scrotum. Squeeze it so that he couldn't even squirm —

(*She is numbly staring at him.*)

I love you, Vishakha. I have not looked at another woman in my whole life. But that you happened to marry Paravasu is not my fault!

(*Pause. Yavakri paces restlessly, waiting for the Brahma Rakshasa.*)

VISHAKHA: (*Quietly.*) I was so happy this morning. You were so good. So warm. I wanted to envelope you in everything I could give. It was more as a mother that I offered my breasts to you —

(*He is pacing restlessly, looking eagerly in the direction of Raibhya's hermitage. Quietly, she goes to the kamandalu and picks it up.*)

Why is life so contrary, Yavakri? One thinks one has stepped onto a bit of solid ground — a little haven — and the earth gives way —

YAVAKRI: Where's that shadow puppet?

(*Slowly, calmly, Vishakha starts pouring the water out. He looks at her and for a moment cannot comprehend what she is doing. He suddenly screams.*)

Oh God! What are you doing? The water — the sanctified water! My life! What are you doing?

(*He grabs the kamandalu from her hand. It's empty. He starts banging it on the ground.*)

Water, please! Just a drop. Oh gods! Only a drop . . . You devil. I trusted you . . . A drop of water.

(*Suddenly a very strange wail is heard from the distance, unearthly, terrifying and evil. Vishakha is frightened.*)

VISHAKHA: Yavakri, hurry. Go to your father's hermitage.

YAVAKRI: A drop — only a drop.

VISHAKHA: (*Pushing him.*) Go! Run!

YAVAKRI: I'm not here to run away — I've triumphed over Indra, the Lord of Gods. Who are you to order me around?

VISHAKHA: Go!

(*She pushes him. Suddenly Yavakri wakes up and starts to run.*)

Don't stop till you reach your father's house.

(*Yavakri runs. Vishakha stares after him, then heaves a sigh and turns. The Brahma Rakshasa has entered and is standing behind her. She sees him, gasps, and falls down in a faint. The Brahma Rakshasa runs after Yavakri. Yavakri stops now and then, desperately digs for water, then not finding any runs on.*

*He comes to the hermitage, which is still being guarded by Andhaka. As Yavakri comes running and is about to step into the hermitage, Andhaka jumps up and grabs him. Doesn't let him move.*)

ANDHAKA: Who's that? Who —

YAVAKRI: Let me go! Let me —

(*The Brahma Rakshasa comes and spears him. Yavakri collapses in Andhaka's arms. The demon pulls out the trident and goes away.*)

ANDHAKA: Who — Yavakri — ? Yavakri — Son.

(*He lowers Yavakri's body to the ground. Shakes him furiously as though to wake him up. Arvasu comes running, stands frozen with horror.*)

Yavakri! Child! What happened to you? I didn't recognize your steps — Why, why couldn't I recognize your steps?

(*It gets dark on stage.*)

# *Act Two*

*(Evening. The village square. Nittilai's brother and a couple of his friends are waiting under a tree. They talk in low tones. The brother looks up and sees Arvasu in the distance.)*

BROTHER: He's come!

FRIENDS: Oh God! Now? —

*(They fall silent as Arvasu comes running. He is sweating, panting. They do not greet him. He tries to regain his breath. Looks around.)*

ARVASU: Hello! Isn't the Council of the Elders meeting here?

*(The brother nods.)*

Then where — where is everybody?

BROTHER: Everyone's gone home.

ARVASU: Home? Oh God! But — but — the Elders —

BROTHER: The Elders waited for you all day. You did not come.

ARVASU: I know. I'm sorry. But I couldn't help it. What happened was —

BROTHER: It doesn't matter.

ARVASU: It does. It does. Please. I would like to explain to the Elders and apologize.

BROTHER: It's no —

ARVASU: *(Suppressing the mounting panic.)* You judge for yourself. I was on my way here when I saw Yavakri running. He was scared. I knew his life was in danger. I ran after him. When I got to his hermitage, he was lying there. Dead.

BROTHER: Dead?

ARVASU: Blood was still spurting from his back. Andhaka was there too — but had gone stone-deaf. He couldn't hear anything I said to him. Blind. Stunned. How could I leave the dead body with him there and come away?

*(The brother listens intently.)*

ARVASU: The blood was fresh. It was gushing out. And wild animals had already started appearing in the bushes. Hyenas.

Wolves. Ready to tear into Yavakri — into the old man, too. I had to cremate the body on the spot . . . What would you have done?

BROTHER: (*Guarded.*) You were perfectly right.

ARVASU: I knew you would understand. I know the Elders will too. I —

BROTHER: The Elders have all gone home.

ARVASU: I'll go to each one's house and explain. I'll touch their feet. I'll ask their forgiveness. Perhaps the Elders can meet again tomorrow —

BROTHER: Meet again? To do what?

ARVASU: To bless me and Nittilai!

BROTHER: Arvasu, since you failed to attend the Council meeting, the Elders decreed that Nittilai will marry another boy — of our own tribe.

(*Arvasu stares, stunned.*)

ARVASU: What? Oh, no! No! No! No! That can't be —

BROTHER: That'll have to be, Arvasu. It's the decision of the Elders.

ARVASU: But it's not sunset yet! Nittilai said the Council would go on till sundown — I'm here well before then —

BROTHER: I agree. I'm afraid my father was a little hasty. But he was tired of waiting. He felt angry, humiliated. 'This daughter of mine has made me a laughing stock in the eyes of the world', he said, 'I'm willing to marry her off to anyone who'll take her.' Fortunately, it was a nice young man, one of our relatives, who stepped forward. Nittilai will be happy. Console yourself with that thought.

ARVASU: No, no, you're making fun of me. I know you are — tell me you're making —

BROTHER: Nothing can be changed now. If only you'd come half an hour earlier.

ARVASU: Half an hour! Half an hour! Don't say that. Please, can I see the young man? I'll explain to him. Plead with him. I'll debase myself in front of him. Please, let me meet your father and the Elders. I'll go right now — I'll explain — It can't be —

BROTHER: Go home, Arvasu.

ARVASU: I'll offer chunks of my flesh to your gods as a penance —

BROTHER: It's no use.

ARVASU: (*Shouts.*) But I want my Nittilai — I —

(*In one quick movement, the brother knocks him down and plants his foot on his chest.*)

BROTHER: You've caused enough trouble, Brahmin. Nittilai is to be married in the next couple of days. People are already sniggering about the two of you. Don't shame her further by shouting her name in public.

ARVASU: Can I — can I talk to her?

BROTHER: (*Withdrawing.*) No, you can't. Not till the wedding's over.

ARVASU: And after that?

BROTHER: That's up to her and her husband.

ARVASU: Please, tell me. How's she taken it?

BROTHER: It's been a terrible day for her. She is exhausted. Even now she is crying her heart out. You'll only make it worse for her by hanging around here. Go away.

ARVASU: (*Starts to go, turns.*) But listen. It's not my fault.

(*The brother grabs him by the scruff of his neck.*)

BROTHER: Go!

(*Arvasu stumbles home. Raibhya is still awake. Arvasu throws himself down in a corner of the veranda.*

*Footsteps. Paravasu enters in the dark. He is covered in a black rug. He carries a bow and quiver of arrows slung on his back.*)

RAIBHYA: Who's that? Who's that coming in the dead of the night?

PARAVASU: It's me, Father. Paravasu.

RAIBHYA: (*Taken aback.*) Paravasu?

(*Runs out of the house to make sure.*)

Paravasu? It's not possible!

PARAVASU: (*Gently.*) Your blessings be on my head, Father.

(*Prostrates himself in front of Raibhya.*)

RAIBHYA: (*Horrified.*) You? Here? What are you doing here? There's still a month left to go before the sacrifice ends. You are — you can't — you have broken the rules! You are *deliberately defying* the gods!

PARAVASU: I felt like coming home.

RAIBHYA: Felt? And just walked out? With the ritual bracelet on? As though the sacrifice were a market place? . . . Or have they thrown you out? Your wife's reputation must have reached there by now —

*(By now Arvasu and Vishakha have got up and are listening from a distance.)*

PARAVASU: *(Gently.)* Of course, they've heard the news. But they haven't chased me out.

RAIBHYA: So this is your usual insolence. Wilful transgression of the rules —

PARAVASU: If I am back there before dawn, no one need know.

RAIBHYA: *(Explodes.)* No one need know? The Chief Priest of the royal sacrifice sneaks out at night, crawls home, his face covered like a leper, and you think the gods won't know? They won't retaliate? How could I have fathered two such imbeciles? I told the King, 'Mark my words, my son defecates wherever he goes. And he will defecate in your sacrifice — '

PARAVASU: The King often says he would have preferred you to be the Chief Priest. But it was a seven-year rite. They thought . . . a younger man safer.

RAIBHYA: I see. So you measured my life-span, did you — you and your King? Tested the strength of my life-line? Well, the sacrifice is almost over and I'm still here. Still here. Alive and kicking. Tell the King I shall outlive my sons. I shall live long enough to feed their dead souls. Tell him the swarm of dogs sniffing around my daughter-in-law's bottom keeps me in good shape.

PARAVASU: I thought with your permission I would have a word with my wife.

RAIBHYA: You disgust me. You and that bitch of yours. I am going out —

PARAVASU: At this time of night, Father? Isn't it dangerous in the jungle?

*(Calls.)*

Arvasu —

ARVASU: Yes —

*(Steps out.)*

RAIBHYA: If you want to be alone with your wife, send that fool somewhere else. I don't need him. It's not the wild beasts one has to watch out for — it's the human beings —

*(Paravasu bows to his father. Raibhya walks off. Paravasu turns to Arvasu.)*

PARAVASU: How are you?

ARVASU: I'm all right.

PARAVASU: *(Pause.)* Your eyes are blood-shot. I'm sorry if I've disturbed your sleep.

ARVASU: No, no.

PARAVASU: With your love of theatre, I should have thought you would be quite used to late nights.

ARVASU: There haven't been any plays for ages . . . what with this famine.

*(Paravasu senses something is wrong but doesn't say anything. Arvasu is confused and tries to hide his confusion.)*

I tell everyone — let brother's sacrifice conclude. It will rain. The players will come back —

PARAVASU: *(Smiles.)* And then you'll be able to act on stage again.

ARVASU: Me? I never act. I haven't done so since you asked me not to —

PARAVASU: I told you not to act?

ARVASU: Don't you remember? Long ago — before you left for the sacrifice — I was dancing with the hunters and you said: 'If you value your Brahminhood, don't act on stage.' I haven't since.

PARAVASU: Arvasu! How silly of you to have taken me at my word. You shouldn't have obeyed me!

ARVASU: I couldn't *disobey* you —

PARAVASU: Then you should have asked me again!

ARVASU: Again? How would that have helped?

PARAVASU: You asked a question. It evoked an answer. Suppose, you repeated the same question — precisely — in the same words. You would get the same answer. You ask again. Would that have helped? Yes, certainly. Each time the question and the answer were repeated, a new nuance would have arisen. Do you know, you could repeat a question and

an answer without altering a syllable, endlessly, and create a whole new universe of meanings, more acceptable to you?

(*Arvasu looks at Paravasu, uncomprehending. Then.*)

ARVASU: I'll be on the tamarind hill. Call me if you need me.

(*Arvasu runs away. Paravasu puts away his bow and arrows. Vishakha brings a pot of water and silently places it near Paravasu, who washes his hands and feet in total silence. He sits down. Long pause.*)

VISHAKHA: (*In a low voice.*) How are you, Husband?

(*No reply.*)

Only occasional bits of news about you. When someone from here goes to the city and attends the sacrifice —

(*No response.*)

Are you well? Or do you still drive yourself to the point of illness — like a demon?

(*No reply.*)

I was sure you wouldn't come home even if I were on my deathbed.

(*No reply.*)

But my fornication was reason enough, wasn't it?

(*No reply.*)

Whatever you heard about Yavakri and me . . . was no rumour.

(*No reply.*)

Yavakri and you. How much you resemble each other. You both go away when you feel like it. Come back without an explanation. As though Indra is explanation enough! He isn't. Not for me. Why did you go away like that?

PARAVASU: One can practise austerities like your fool, Yavakri, to coerce the gods to bend to one's will. Stand in a circle of fire. Torture oneself. So many techniques, all equally crass, to make the gods appear. And when they give in, what do you do? Extend the begging bowl: 'Give us rains. Cattle. Sons. Wealth.' As though one defined human beings by their begging — I despise it. I went because the fire sacrifice is a formal rite. Structured. It involves no emotional acrobatics from the participants. The process itself will bring Indra to me. And if anything goes wrong, there's nothing the gods

can do about it. It has to be set right by a man. By me. That's why when the moment comes I shall confront Indra in silence. As an equal. For that, it is essential that one shed all human weakness. Be alone. Absolutely on one's own to face that moment. Become a diamond. Unscratchable.

VISHAKHA: And become immortal?

PARAVASU: At least for that moment, yes.

VISHAKHA: And for that you must break all the rules?

PARAVASU: To say 'all' is to make a rule.

*(He gets up.)*

VISHAKHA: Will you come home once the fire sacrifice is over?

*(No answer.)*

I suppose that would be too human. But what's wrong with being human? What's wrong with being happy, as we were before you got Indra into you?

*(No answer.)*

I shouldn't ask. I should be silent. And you, in any case, will be silent. My silence again followed by yours. Silences endlessly repeated. Perhaps they too will describe a whole universe. But I am sick of silence.

*(No answer.)*

All right. Then do me a favour before you go back. Please.

*(She takes his bow and arrow, puts them in his hands with the arrow pointing to herself. Then lies down on her back in front of him.)*

I'll lay myself open to you as a devoted wife.

PARAVASU: You want me to kill you?

VISHAKHA: At last, a question from you.

*(Pause.)*

We're three of us here. Your brother's never home. That leaves me and your father.

*(Pause.)*

Something died inside your father the day the King invited you to be the Chief Priest. He's been drying up like a dead tree since then. No sap runs in him.

*(Pause.)*

On the one hand, there's his sense of being humiliated by you. On the other, there's lust. It consumes him. An old

man's curdled lust. And there's no one else here to take his rage out on but me.

(*Pause.*)

At least Yavakri was warm, gentle. For a few minutes, he made me forget the wizened body, the scratchy claws, and the blood, cold as ice. And he paid for it with his life.

(*Raibhya's steps are heard in the distance, as he returns.*)

Here it comes. The crab! Scuttling back to make sure I don't defile the Chief Priest as I did Yavakri. Grant me this favour, please. Kill me. For all your experiments you haven't yet tried the ultimate. Human sacrifice! You could now.

PARAVASU: You're right. I must.

(*Pause.*)

You are still my guru.

(*He aims his arrow at her. A long silence as they wait. Then a low cough is heard from Raibhya. Instantly Paravasu moves the arrow around so that it points in the direction of Raibhya, shoots an arrow. Raibhya collapses without a sound. Vishakha gasps. Pause.*)

VISHAKHA: Now you'll never know if I told you a lie.

(*Pause.*)

PARAVASU: You didn't need to. He deserved to die. He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the last stages of the sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri, but to be even with me. I had to attend to him before he went any farther.

(*Pause.*)

VISHAKHA: What's worrying you then?

(*No answer.*)

Something is, isn't it? I knew it the moment I saw you this evening. And it wasn't just your father. Something else you've come looking for.

(*No answer.*)

Yavakri would have poured out his woes. But you'd rather let the poison burn your insides than speak out.

(*Takes his hand in her hand.*)

Look at your hand. It's so tense. Your sinews are twisted like ropes — ready to snap. Tell me. What's bothering you?

PARAVASU: (*Looks in the direction of Raibhya.*) We must attend to the old man.

VISHAKHA: He's had a long life. Why should he be in a hurry now?

*(They look at each other. The stage darkens on them. We see Arvasu on the tamarind hill talking to himself.)*

ARVASU: Thorns! The wind has thorns now. The light too is nettled. Words — even your name, Nittilai — has fangs that rip the skin off my mind and make it bleed. How can I punish myself enough? Half an hour! Half an hour! But I stopped to bathe on my way to your village — to dig for water so I could wash myself before coming to you. I knew it was getting late, but I had just cremated a dead body. I couldn't bear the thought of touching you with those unclean hands. An untouchable wouldn't have cared. An outcaste wouldn't have cared. But my cursed caste wouldn't let me go . . . To think you would have been mine. Half an hour!

PARAVASU'S VOICE: Arvasu — Arvasu —

*(Arvasu gets up. Runs to the hermitage. He sees Paravasu and Vishakha bending over something near a thicket.)*

PARAVASU: Arvasu — here!

*(Plucks the arrow from Raibhya's body.)*

ARVASU: Where are you?

PARAVASU: Here, near the neem tree.

ARVASU: What are you doing there?

*(He goes and finds Paravasu and Vishakha kneeling over Raibhya's body.)*

What is it? What's happened? Is that Father? What happened to him? Oh God! Blood! Blood — what's happened? Oh my God — I can't —

PARAVASU: In the dark, I — I mistook him for a wild animal —

ARVASU: *(Almost hysterical.)* Is he all right? We must do something. He may still be alive. There. His eye-lids — they're moving. Let's move him to —

PARAVASU: Take hold of yourself, Arvasu. He is dead —

*(Arvasu starts crying. Paravasu slaps him.)*

Stop it. Don't be a child. There's no time to howl and wail now. I have to get back before I'm missed.

*(Arvasu and Vishakha react.)*

If anyone gets wind of what's happened here, the fire sacrifice is ruined. Do you follow me?

ARVASU: But — after all this — do you mean to go back? To the sacrifice?

PARAVASU: Yes, the sacrifice must go on. You know that. And only I can ensure that —

ARVASU: But the blood — on your hands —

PARAVASU: Yes, that has to be washed. We must atone for Father's death. I know I should perform the rites of penitence. But I have to return. Immediately. So there's only one person who can do that. You. As his son, it's your prerogative and your duty.

*(Vishakha and Arvasu react in horror.)*

Cremate the body right now. And then concentrate on the penitential rites.

ARVASU: But, Brother —

PARAVASU: But? What do you mean 'but'? Can't you see what is at stake? You must do it.

*(He starts to leave.)*

VISHAKHA: Say 'No', Arvasu.

ARVASU: Sister-in-law —

VISHAKHA: Refuse. He killed his father. Let him atone for it. Don't get involved in it.

ARVASU: But then — what about the sacrifice?

VISHAKHA: Let it go to ruin. Does it matter? There has been enough bloodshed already. Enough tears. Live your own life.

PARAVASU: *(As though she hasn't spoken.)* Don't rush through the rites. Perform them with care. Every detail has to be right.

ARVASU: *(Lost.)* Bless me, Brother.

*(Paravasu blesses him by placing his right palm on his head and walks away. Vishakha stares dumbly after him and then walks mechanically back to the hermitage. Arvasu starts piling wood for the funeral pyre.*

*Paravasu walks back through the jungle when a figure jumps out of the shadows and stands in his path. Paravasu and the Brahma Rakshasa stare at each other for a brief moment.)*

PARAVASU: Ah! Not the Brahma Rakshasa himself! What a pleasure.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: How did you recognize me?

PARAVASU: I was expecting you. Where else could you possibly go?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Help me. Please.

PARAVASU: Don't ask me. I don't help anyone.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Please, don't say that. I beg of you. You are my only hope.

PARAVASU: Hope of what?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I admire you. You aren't scared of me. You are tough. Your father gave me a new birth. We two are brothers.

PARAVASU: I don't need any more brothers.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: You have no choice. Look, when I lived my 'human life', I — how shall I put it — I was bad. I'll spare you the details. But the result was that after my death I was not reborn, as any ordinary mortal would do. I became a Brahma Rakshasa. A soul locked in nothingness like a foetus stitched up inside its mother's sac. You can't imagine the horror of that existence. Nothing to look forward to: no birth, no death; nothingness stretching endlessly. Your father plucked me out and put me back in time, in order to kill Yavakri. I didn't want to, but I obeyed. And as a result, now I have something new. Hope. Of release — release from this state —

PARAVASU: You should have asked Father —

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I would have. But you killed him before he'd recovered from his ordeal. *You* killed him. Now you have taken on his inheritance. Not that I mind. You may be more capable of getting me what I want —

PARAVASU: What do you want?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Free me from this pain. Liberate me. I want to fade away. To become nothing —

PARAVASU: (*Laughs.*) Yavakri asked for 'all knowledge' in a begging bowl. You ask for the final release. Moksha! The demands seem to be escalating! I am not interested in your final release. I am not even interested in *my* final release.

(*Mocking.*)

'Liberate' you! How's one supposed to do that?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I wish I knew. I can only beg. Ask the gods when you face them.

PARAVASU: I will ask them for nothing.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: You talk of immortality. Look, I have been immortal! And I long for death. Release me. You owe it to me.

PARAVASU: I don't owe anyone anything. Don't pester me. You'll get nothing.

*(They have reached the sacrificial site.)*

I must go in. Remember the sacrificial enclosures are protected against all unnatural spirits.

*(Goes in. The Brahma Rakshasa watches him.)*

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: It's not so easy to get rid of a brother — Brother!

*(Disappears.*

*Arvasu completes the funeral rites. Comes home. Calls out to his sister-in-law. No reply. He goes in. The hermitage is empty. In a corner he sees the water pot, covered with cobwebs. He walks out of the house.*

*Arvasu comes to the sacrificial area. The fire sacrifice is going on. He enters the enclosure and goes and sits among the Brahmins watching the rituals. Paravasu, initially engrossed in his work, notices him and suddenly freezes. His face turns pale. Words fail him. His unexpected silence draws everyone's attention. The hymns come to a stop. They all stare, uncomprehending, at Paravasu first and then at Arvasu. Arvasu is baffled and embarrassed.)*

PARAVASU: You!

*(Points to Arvasu, who gets up, puzzled, scared.)*

ARVASU: Me?

PARAVASU: Yes, you! Who are you?

ARVASU: Me? I —

PARAVASU: Yes. Tell us.

ARVASU: I'm Arvasu, son of Raibhya.

PARAVASU: And where have you come from?

ARVASU: My father died. I've just completed his obsequies — and the expiation.

PARAVASU: Why the expiation? Tell us. Why?

ARVASU: He was killed —

(*Consternation in the assembly. Paravasu silences the crowds.*)

PARAVASU: At whose hands?

(*Long pause.*)

ARVASU: At the hands of his son.

(*The gathering breaks out into commotion.*)

PARAVASU: Patricide — patricide! What is he doing in these sanctified precincts? Throw him out — out! Out! Demon!

ARVASU: But — but —

(*Three or four Brahmins pounce on Arvasu and drag him out. Dazed, Arvasu lets himself be dragged and pushed out of the sacrificial enclosure. Suddenly, he starts shouting.*)

ARVASU: But why, Brother, why? . . . Why?

(*A couple of soldiers get hold of him and drag him away as he keeps shouting.*)

Why? Why? Tell me why — please.

(*Paravasu looks at the assembly of priests and watchers.*)

PARAVASU: As the sacrifice approaches its completion, the demons come out. Rakshasas. Their sole aim is to disrupt the sacrifice. We must be on our guard.

(*At a sign from him, the rites begin again. The stage darkens.*)

# *Act Three*

*(Night. The outskirts of the city. The stage is filled with bodies of people sleeping. Nittilai sleeps next to Arvasu.*

*Arvasu wakes up. Sits up. Looks around, and as though frightened by the night, begins to crawl across the sleeping bodies. Nittilai stretches her hand out in her sleep to make sure Arvasu is next to her. He is not there. She sits up with a start, looks around, sees him and goes to him.)*

NITTILAI: Arvasu —

*(Arvasu gasps and turns to her.)*

Where are you going?

*(He stares.)*

It's me, Nittilai —

*(She feels his forehead.)*

The fever has gone down. Thank God!

*(Feels his clothes.)*

You are soaking wet.

ARVASU: *(Unbelieving.)* Nittilai! You — ?

It can't be — it isn't —

NITTILAI: *(Laughing.)* Yes, it is.

*(Suddenly Arvasu laughs happily like a child.)*

ARVASU: Nittilai! Nittilai! Am I dreaming? Or are you really here? You won't disappear again, will you? Nittilai! Where have you come from, Nittilai? You *are* Nittilai, aren't you? Don't melt away. Please. Nittilai — stay, now that you're here. *(Grabs her hand.)*

I'll hold on to Nittilai now. I won't let Nittilai go.

NITTILAI: Ssh! You'll wake them up!

ARVASU: *(Laughing.)* How did you come here?

NITTILAI: We can't talk in this place. Let's go there.

*(Helps him up. He is light-headed and almost falls down again. She supports him. She also carries a bundle of fruit with her. They move a little distance away.)*

Be careful! You're still light-headed.

ARVASU: (*Laughing.*) Light-headed. Light-footed. I'm flying — I'm floating — I'm flowing down a torrent of wind — I feel happy. You are here! It's beautiful.

(*Tries to stand by himself. Reels. Clings to her. They both laugh.*)

NITTILAI: Wait! Don't be a child. Here. Let me tie your dhoti properly.

(*Unselfconsciously, she reties his dhoti, as though he were a child. Then leads him along.*)

Sit down here.

(*She rekindles a dying fire as they talk.*)

ARVASU: Where are we?

NITTILAI: Outside the city gates.

ARVASU: And these people?

NITTILAI: Mostly starving villagers. They are here for the end of the fire sacrifice. They are waiting for the concluding feast.

ARVASU: The fire sacrifice. Yes. I remember.

(*He looks at her attentively.*)

You look so lovely. All those patterns on your hands and face. You're like a bride.

(*Suddenly.*)

But — didn't you go home to sleep last night?

NITTILAI: (*Puts a fruit in his hand.*) Here. Eat this. I don't know when you had a proper meal last.

ARVASU: How is it that you're here, Nittilai?

NITTILAI: I've run away.

ARVASU: From your husband?

NITTILAI: From my husband. From my family. From everything.

(*Pause.*)

ARVASU: Oh!

(*Pause.*)

Why? Didn't you like him? Did he beat you?

NITTILAI: I liked him. Very much. He's always smiling. I might have been happy with him.

(*Pause.*)

If any other girl had done what I have done, I'd be the first to thrash her in the village square. But when I heard what'd happened to you —

ARVASU: What?

NITTILAI: We heard terrible stories.

ARVASU: (*Remembering.*) Yes, yes.

NITTILAI: I almost died when I heard they'd thrashed you. I got up and . . . ran all the way here.

ARVASU: (*Pause.*) And how did you find me —

NITTILAI: It didn't take much searching. Every stray pup here knows about you.

(*Long pause.*)

ARVASU: I went back to meet Paravasu.

(*Excited.*)

That night. I had to know why. What had I done? I thought he might tell me if I went to him secretly. So I went back at night. But he never came out —

NITTILAI: Arvasu, it's all right. All that's done with —

ARVASU: Soldiers pounced on me. Kicked me. Dragged me to some cemetery. Tore my sacred thread. I kept calling out to him. 'Why, Brother, why?' They beat me.

NITTILAI: There now — don't excite yourself. Lie down.

ARVASU: Did he think I was married to you? Did he think I had become a low-caste actor? No, no. I remember. He clearly said: 'Out! Out! Demon . . . Away with you!'

NITTILAI: Quiet now. Come, sleep for a while. It's still dark.

(*She makes him lie down with his head on her lap.*)

ARVASU: I had such nightmares. And whenever I woke up I saw these bodies. Lying about, inert in the dark. I thought I was in the land of the dead. But I didn't see *you*. I wish I had.

(*Stares at her.*)

I worshipped my brother. And he betrayed me. I let you down and you risk everything for my sake.

NITTILAI: (*Simply.*) I like you.

(*Gives him another fruit.*)

Here, I hid these for you. There are three children in the actor's family. Poor things! They're eternally famished —

ARVASU: Actors?

NITTILAI: Yes, it was they who saved your life.

ARVASU: (*Suddenly.*) Nittilai, how long is it since you left home?

NITTILAI: Three days.

ARVASU: (*Excited.*) Three days! Three days, she says calmly! And you've been moving around in this city for three days! Are you crazed?

NITTILAI: (*Lightly.*) I was only waiting for you to gain some strength.

ARVASU: (*Angry.*) Woman, have you no brains? You only think of others! I know your people. Hunters. Once they decide on vengeance . . . We must leave immediately.

NITTILAI: Let's. If your legs have gained as much strength as your voice, we should be able to cover a fair distance today!

(*Suddenly they both burst out laughing. Then in a serious voice.*) Arvasu, when I say we should go together — I don't mean we have to live together — like lovers or like husband and wife. I have been vicious enough to my husband. I don't want to disgrace him further. Let's be together — like brother and sister. You marry any girl you like. Only please, Arvasu — spare a corner for me.

ARVASU: I won't marry. Ever. It's enough that you are there with me.

NITTILAI: (*Gets up.*) Take a little rest. I'll see you soon.

ARVASU: Where are you going?

NITTILAI: Let me arrange for something to eat on the way. Some meat. Fruit. The actor's family wants to go with us. Those poor starving babies —

ARVASU: (*Gently.*) Nittilai —

(*Nittilai stops.*) While you're away I think I'll make another attempt.

NITTILAI: Attempt?

ARVASU: To see my brother.

NITTILAI: How will you do that? Will he let you come anywhere near him?

ARVASU: No, he won't. But how can I go away without knowing why he acted as he did? I have to find out — I must —

NITTILAI: Will he tell you?

ARVASU: I don't think so.

(*Pause.*) No — he won't.

NITTILAI: And suppose he did tell you? What will that do for you? Haven't you suffered enough?

ARVASU: If he can't justify his act — I'll — I'll push his face in it. I'll make him pay — I'll revenge myself on him —

NITTILAI: Arvasu!

ARVASU: I can't help it. I want to make them all pay. Yavakri. Father. Paravasu. It's a conspiracy, don't you see, it's all planned — because I wanted to marry you. Because I was ready to reject my caste, my birth. Can't you see it? I wanted to strike out on my own. So, first a corpse curls itself round my ankles. Yavakri. Then it's Father. Bodies drenched in blood. Like rats that pour out during the plague and die vomiting blood.

NITTILAI: Arvasu —

ARVASU: Listen. It's clear to me. Yavakri is dead. Father is dead — and Paravasu is alive. So he must know. He must be behind it all — my brother knew I would marry you even if he forbade it. So he — and his wife — and all those priests — yes, they planted those corpses in my way.

NITTILAI: You are talking nonsense.

ARVASU: You don't understand. You hunters — you only know minor spells and witchcrafts — spirits slithering in shallow caves or dangling on trees. But Yavakri and Father and Brother can bring out the terrors from the womb of the earth and play with them. They can set this foul nature against you. Can't you see the design in it all? Corpses pursuing me — evil, like a stink emanating from that sacrifice —

NITTILAI: Suppose you are right. What are you going to do about it?

ARVASU: I don't know. I don't know anything. Don't confuse me with questions. But if such an evil man continues as the Chief Priest of the sacrifice, it'll rain blood at the end —

NITTILAI: Leave that to the gods, Arvasu. Look at your family. Yavakri avenges his father's shame by attacking your sister-in-law. Your father avenges her by killing Yavakri. Your brother kills your father. And now you in your turn want vengeance — where will it all end?

ARVASU: So what do I do? Sit in a corner with my hands crossed, like an eunuch?

NITTILAI: Do that. Better that than become the man you hate.

ARVASU: Become? What's there left for me to become? I am an unregenerate sinner in the eyes of the world, a killer.

NITTILAI: Then kick that world aside, Arvasu. Your hands are clean. Even I have wounded — betrayed — my husband. You have remained good. Stay that way. We don't need this world. We can find our own.

(*He doesn't answer. A long tense pause. Nittilai gets up.*)

All right, let's go.

ARVASU: Go? Where?

NITTILAI: Let's go and face your brother. I don't want you to feel I'm depriving you.

ARVASU: (*Calms down.*) You are right. He won't let me come anywhere near him. I knew that from the beginning, didn't I? So what was I making such a fuss about? Do you think I'm going mad?

NITTILAI: You've been through so much, I'm surprised you're not worse.

(*The Actor-Manager comes.*)

ACTOR-MANAGER: Ahha! So the patient is better today?

NITTILAI: Yes, thank you.

(*To Arvasu.*)

He saved your life, Arvasu.

ARVASU: Thank you —

ACTOR-MANAGER: Hardly 'saved'. Our old man died. We went to bury him. And there you were in the burial grounds — stretched out stiff. Except that you weren't cold. You were burning hot. The bamboos we'd taken him out on served to carry you back. And you almost burned through them.

NITTILAI: I'm sorry your old man had to go. But it's lucky for us he chose that day. How's your brother?

ACTOR-MANAGER: His foot's much better, thank you. He can hobble about. Your magic touch again!

NITTILAI: (*Pleased.*) Good. I'll get him some fresh herbs.

ACTOR-MANAGER: (*Pointing to Arvasu.*). Now that he's well, do we start today?

NITTILAI: Within the next couple of hours. Let me go and arrange provisions for the trip.

(*Nittilai goes.*)

ACTOR-MANAGER: What an extraordinary girl!

ARVASU: (*Distracted.*) Hm.

ACTOR-MANAGER: Lucky for you that she's here. Don't you ever forget that.

ARVASU: (*Startled.*) Why . . . why should I?

ACTOR-MANAGER: Listen, son. We actors are always on the move. Never stationary. And often along the way we see a scene. A bit of life. Only a tiny bit as we pass by. But enough to give us a sense of the rest of the story.

ARVASU: What do you mean?

ACTOR-MANAGER: I don't know what you are to her. Not that I want to know. Any fool can see you two belong to different worlds. Anything's possible in these troubled times. So I won't comment. But your name's on every tongue in this town and they are mostly trying to spit it out. I didn't save your life. She did. I only found you. You were lucky that she turned up soon after and it's she who's been nursing you. Mopping up your vomit, wiping your bottom. Like a baby. I'm grateful to her because my babies were starving when she came and now they get a bite to eat every day. Where she gets the food from I don't know — but she knows the woods. We would have moved out of this town the day the old man died, except that we've become dependent on her. For food. For nursing. For laughter. We're just waiting to leave with her but she won't budge till you're better.

(*Pause.*)

Something about you worries me. She's a good girl. Don't hurt her.

ARVASU: (*Quietly.*) I won't hurt her.

(*While this scene is going on, in the background, Nittilai's brother and husband enter, make a fire and sit near it, silent and immobile. Nittilai enters, sees them, freezes and flees in panic. They haven't seen her. Long pause. The Actor-Manager hums a song.*)

ARVASU: You said you'd gone to bury your old man when you found me? You bury your dead? Not cremate them?

ACTOR-MANAGER: No, we are actors. We have been actors since the Lord of Creation entrusted the job to my ancestors. The earth gave us the body. When we are done, we hand over the job to our children and hand back the body to the earth.

ARVASU: But the body will rot in the earth, surely . . .

ACTOR-MANAGER: What were we in our mother's womb? Floating bits of flesh? Squiggly worms? To burn is to destroy. Neither the earth gets it. Nor the wind. Well, to each his beliefs! My ancestors were actors and —

ARVASU: Then why are you leaving town?

ACTOR-MANAGER: We came here to perform a play for the sacrifice, but this town hasn't been good for us. The old man died. My brother's foot got infected —

ARVASU: (*Excited.*) How can you give up so easily? Surely you have a duty to your art.

ACTOR-MANAGER: Couldn't agree more. But a body needs to be fed before it can act. In fact, even the gods, who are bodiless, need to be fed before they will act. Hence all these oblations. But there are no oblations without a performance, and there's no performance without actors. I don't have enough actors, it's as simple as that.

ARVASU: (*Shyly.*) May I — may I — ask you something?

ACTOR-MANAGER: Go ahead.

ARVASU: You don't mind?

ACTOR-MANAGER: What is it?

ARVASU: Will you watch me?

ACTOR-MANAGER: Watch you?

ARVASU: I like dancing. If I dance now — will you tell me if I am any good?

ACTOR-MANAGER: You?

ARVASU: I realize — it sounds absurd —

ACTOR-MANAGER: But you are not an actor. You are a high-caste —

ARVASU: I used to be with the hunters most of the time. Dancing. Singing. I like dancing.

ACTOR-MANAGER: Well, some other time. We'll be travelling together, after all. I have other worries at the moment . . .

(*But Arvasu has started dancing. Initially the Actor-Manager is*

*only half interested. But slowly as Arvasu dances, his eyes light up. He keeps the beat.*)

ACTOR-MANAGER: Not bad — not bad at all.

(*He too stands up and starts dancing. Slowly first, then faster. He leads. Arvasu follows. The Actor-Manager occasionally tries to trick Arvasu with a complicated step. But Arvasu accepts the challenge.*)

Where did you learn all that?

(*Arvasu, increasingly confident, laughs and taps his own skull in reply. He dances faster.*)

Enough. Enough now. Don't tire yourself. You've just got up from the sick-bed. Sit down.

(*They both sit.*)

ARVASU: So — I'm not too bad then?

ACTOR-MANAGER: Bad? You're excellent. And that's what makes my stomach burn. It's just my cursed luck —

ARVASU: Why?

ACTOR-MANAGER: The fire sacrifice will be completed in the next few days. That's long enough for you to pick up a few bits of dialogue and half a dozen steps. We could have a show ready to celebrate the completion — but my evil stars have made sure that the one actor I could use can't go anywhere near the sacrificial precincts.

ARVASU: Actually, I don't think that would be a problem.

ACTOR-MANAGER: What do you mean?

ARVASU: I don't think Brother will stop me from acting. The problem is — I won't act — I can't.

ACTOR-MANAGER: But why not?

ARVASU: Nittilai and I must go away today.

ACTOR-MANAGER: We could all leave together — later —

ARVASU: No, we must leave — today.

ACTOR-MANAGER: (*Disappointed.*) Oh!

(*Hopefully.*)

Perhaps we can have a show in some other town — on the way?

ARVASU: Perhaps.

(*Pause.*)

In a land far, far away!

(*Pause.*)

ACTOR-MANAGER: Let me warn you. I never give up.

(*Nittilai comes rushing in. She is frightened.*)

NITTILAI: Arvasu, Arvasu —

ARVASU: Nittilai!

ACTOR-MANAGER: What's happened?

NITTILAI: I was on my way — and I saw them. They were sitting round a fire . . . They didn't see me — in the dark —

ARVASU: Who?

NITTILAI: My brother. And husband.

ARVASU: Oh my God!

ACTOR-MANAGER: Ah!

NITTILAI: I just turned round and ran back —

ARVASU: (*Excited.*) We must leave then — immediately. Before it dawns, we must get out of the city —

NITTILAI: (*Desperate.*) No, no, we can't. Not now. Don't you see? It's too late —

ARVASU: Too late? Why?

NITTILAI: They don't know I'm here. That's why it's taken them three days to get here. They must have been searching among friends and relatives —

ARVASU: So?

NITTILAI: But everyone knows you're here. In this city. If you disappear now, they'll instantly realize we're together. Then they'll chase us —

ARVASU: So what do we do?

NITTILAI: I don't know!

ACTOR-MANAGER: Is this why you have been acting so mysterious, girl? Why didn't you tell me? I'm a wizard at disguise. With a little bit of make-up, I would have changed your entire appearance. Made you as good as invisible —

ARVASU: (*Exasperated.*) They are hunters. They don't need to see a quarry. They can smell it out. And once they are on the track, they'll run it to the ground.

NITTILAI: One thing's certain, Arvasu. You'll have to stay on in the city — be visible! Only that will throw them off the scent.

ACTOR-MANAGER: But won't they harm him?

ARVASU: No, I am an outsider.

(*Bitterly.*)

Everywhere.

NITTILAI: They're after me.

ARVASU: So what will you do?

NITTILAI: I'll disappear. Go and hide in the jungle.

ARVASU: (*Enraged.*) Hide? What do you mean hide? Are we playing games here? You there. Me here. No, I won't let you go.

NITTILAI: (*Flying into a temper.*) Do you think I want to die? You think I want to be hunted down by my brother and my husband? If they had come separately, it might have meant anything. But they're here — together! And they sat there by the fire — still. Alert. Listening. We never talk when we are on a hunt. We only listen. And my husband wasn't smiling. He looked — so sad. That scares me, Arvasu. I'm still young. I don't want to die.

(*She starts weeping.*)

ARVASU: Don't cry. Please. It'll soon be light. And if you have to go you must. But what am I to do?

NITTILAI: (*Angry.*) Why do you keep asking me? Why don't *you* decide? Don't push everything on to my shoulders —

ARVASU: (*Quietly.*) I only meant — staying here in the city won't be easy — being spat upon, sneered at —

NITTILAI: Is that all you can think of when —

ACTOR-MANAGER: Act in my show.

ARVASU: (*Annoyed.*) Please, don't try to be funny —

ACTOR-MANAGER: I'm quite serious. If you are going to be here till the sacrifice is over, you might as well take part in my play.

ARVASU: Listen now —

NITTILAI: What's that?

ACTOR-MANAGER: A moment ago he danced. He danced like a celestial being. With him I could stage a show in honour of the festival. But he won't agree —

NITTILAI: Paravasu will never let him —

ARVASU: (*Defiant.*) Paravasu himself has ostracized me. I'm an outcaste now. He can't stop me from acting . . . but how can I sing and dance while you're in mortal danger?

NITTILAI: I'll be safe enough. The jungle's like a home to me.

ACTOR-MANAGER: I am a selfish man. If this performance takes place, I'll be rich. We'll all be rich. My children will sleep on a full stomach for another two months. But that's not all. Think of yourself. If Arvasu has to be 'visible', what better than rehearsing in the open, getting ready for a stage performance with the whole town in attendance?

(*Pause. He waits for his words to sink in.*)

NITTILAI: Are you sure he'll be able to carry it off? He's never faced an audience before.

ACTOR-MANAGER: I am a professional, Sister. Do you think I would knowingly risk a failure? I even have a play ready. We'd just decided on it when the old man died. A perfect choice for this fire sacrifice. *The Triumph of Lord Indra*. A play about the struggle between Lord Indra and the demon Vritra.

(*She laughs.*)

NITTILAI: Then Arvasu will want to play the demon.

(*To Arvasu.*)

Aren't I right?

(*To the Actor-Manager.*)

He loves all that ghoulish make-up, the roaring and thumping, the acrobatics.

ARVASU: I never know whether you're going to laugh or cry.

ACTOR-MANAGER: He'll have to play Vritra. I, needless to say, will play the main role, Indra. The actor playing Vritra basically needs to dance. And my brother is in no state to dance. And the few speeches that are there won't be a problem to a Brahmin.

ARVASU: I am not a Brahmin —

ACTOR-MANAGER: Quite! Quite! But you won't need to be taught basic pronunciation.

(*Pause.*)

Think about it. I'll go and get the costumes for Vritra. If you're willing, we might as well start rehearsals right away.

(*Exits.*)

ARVASU: What shall I do, Nittilai?

NITTILAI: I don't know. What do you want to do?

ARVASU: What he said made good sense. But —

NITTILAI: You've always wanted to act. As long as I can remember. What will you do otherwise? Brood over Paravasu? Whip yourself into a frenzy of anxiety over me?

ARVASU: I'm afraid.

NITTILAI: What's there to fear?

ARVASU: It's the nightmare I told you about. I am dying of thirst. But there's no water. Then I peer into a huge well. There's water there, but it has my reflection in it. I stare at it. And the reflection snarls: 'Why are you staring, wretch? Go away.' So I say: 'You exist because I stare. You wouldn't be there if I went away.' It says: 'You think so, do you, you swollen-headed doll of flesh? I'll show you.' And the reflection leaps out of the water. Gouges my eyes out. Chews up my face in its jaws. I scream, but I have no face . . . It keeps on returning, that nightmare, so that now I'm not at all sure it's me standing here and not my reflection, all ready to attack —

NITTILAI: How long are you going to turn your face away from it then? Face it. Face your brother as you wanted to.

(*He looks at her in surprise.*)

Not in hate, Arvasu. In the play. Show him how good you are. I'm sure the play will wash off the fear — the anger —

(*He nods.*)

ARVASU: All right.

NITTILAI: I'd better go. It's almost dawn.

ARVASU: Nittilai —

NITTILAI: What is it?

ARVASU: Isn't there any way you could watch the play that day? It would give me so much courage —

NITTILAI: I wish I could! But it's too dangerous. Come here after the play is over. At night. There'll be enormous crowds. We'll meet at this point — and fade away —

(*She stands reluctant to go.*)

I'm glad you're not playing Indra. I don't like that god of yours.

ARVASU: Why?

NITTILAI: He is immortal. When someone doesn't die, can't die, what can he know about anything? He can't change himself. He can't — can't *create* anything. I like Vritra because even

when he's triumphant he chooses death. I always wonder — if the flowers didn't know they were to fade and die, would they have ever blossomed?

*(Gets up:)*

I must leave.

ARVASU: Nittilai, I wish you could hide here — in the city somewhere.

NITTILAI: No. It's better that even you don't know where I am.

*(Moves to go.)*

ARVASU: Don't I —

NITTILAI: Concentrate on your rehearsals. Learn. I am sure you'll be marvellous. I'm sure your dancing will bring the rains — Goodbye —

ARVASU: Nittilai —

*(She smiles and disappears. He stares dumbly after her. The Actor-Manager who's been waiting at a distance enters with the costumes and the mask of Vritra.)*

ACTOR-MANAGER: Here. This is the mask of Vritra the demon. Now surrender to the mask. Surrender and pour life into it. But remember, once you bring a mask to life you have to keep a tight control over it, otherwise it'll try to take over. It'll begin to dictate terms to you and you must never let that happen. Prostrate yourself before it. Pray to it. Enter it. Then control it.

*(Arvasu opens the bundle of clothes and dresses, almost in a trance. The stage darkens. Nittilai's brother and husband melt away in the darkness. The audience, including Paravasu and the King, occupy their places and watch.)*

# *The Epilogue*

*(Slowly, Arvasu puts on the mask. There is a roar of drums and then a sudden silence. Arvasu gives a wild roar and jumps up. He dances violently. The audience responds with enthusiasm. The play is on. The Actor-Manager dressed up as Indra enters from one side. The Actor playing Vishwarupa enters from the other.*

*Vishwarupa and Vritra rush to each other, embrace.)*

VISHWARUPA: Dear Brother Vritra —

VRITRA: Dear Brother Vishwarupa —

*(Since Vishwarupa is limping, Vritra dances, holding Vishwarupa's hands, emphasizing their affection for each other. The audience reacts with pleasure. Indra watches from a distance, then talks to the audience.)*

INDRA: . . . After all, I am Indra, the King of the Gods. Should I then not be Supreme in the three worlds? Should not Brahma, the Father of All Creation, who gave me birth, have ensured that I stood unrivalled in all these domains? But alas! He fell in love with a mortal and produced a son by human womb, whom he crowned the King of Men. Vishwarupa! Everyone admires Vishwarupa. Everyone sings his praises. His wisdom and gentleness and mastery of the lores inspires a love which makes me feel like the eclipsed moon. It threatens my sovereignty of the worlds. But how can I destroy him?

For my father mated with a woman from the nether world and created a third son, a demon, Vritra. He made him the King of the Nether World and told him: 'Vritra, protect your brother Vishwarupa, the King of Men, if necessary with your own life. For Indra is bound to try and harm him!'

And the two are inseparable. I sent, as you saw, the most enchanting of my celestial beauties to lure Vishwarupa to a lonely place. But he will not leave that infernal demon behind. How can I separate them? How can I isolate Vishwarupa?

*(He reflects.)*

Aha! I have it. I shall organize a fire sacrifice in honour of our father, Brahma, the Lord of All Creation . . .

(*He adds with a wink.*)

Whom incidentally I have already destroyed. I shall invite all the gods and men to this sacrifice.

(*Goes round the stage and comes to Vishwarupa.*)

Vishwarupa, my dear brother —

VISHWARUPA: I bow to you, Brother Indra —

INDRA: Vishwarupa, I am conducting a fire sacrifice in our father's memory. All the gods and the best of men have been invited. You must come too —

VISHWARUPA: Indeed, I shall. You are my elder brother. I don't need an invitation to attend a sacrifice conducted by you, I would have come on my own the moment I heard the news.

INDRA: Your love for me is beyond description. Come, enter this sacrificial enclosure.

(*Vishwarupa tries to enter, followed by Vritra.*)

No, Vishwarupa. You are most welcome, but Vritra, who is accompanying you, may not enter the sacrificial precincts.

VISHWARUPA: And why is that?

INDRA: Because he is a demon, a Rakshasa.

VISHWARUPA: But, Brother, he is our father's son. Hence he is our brother and like our father, a Brahmin. Surely you will not forbid him entry?

INDRA: His mother was a demoness and demon blood flows in his veins. A demon may not be permitted near the altar lest he is tempted to desecrate it. The rules are more ancient that us. We cannot tamper with them.

VISHWARUPA: So be it.

(*To Vritra.*)

Dear Vritra, you have heard what Indra has to say. So please, you wait here outside the enclosure while I go in.

VṚITRA: Brother, my father gave me life so I could protect you. Let me come in with you. This Indra is treacherous . . .

VISHWARUPA: But, Vritra, you know that I have extracted from him a promise not to hurt me.

VRITRA: They say gods should never be trusted.

(*Laughter from the audience.*)

Indeed, it's said that when the gods speak to us, the meaning they attach to each word is quite different from the meaning we humans attach to it. Thus *their* side of their speech often denies what *our* side of their speech promises.

(*Applause.*)

Even their silences have double meanings. Hence the saying, that the thirty-three gods occupying the heavens make for sixty-six silences.

(*Laughter.*)

At least.

(*Thunderous applause and laughter.*)

VISHWARUPA: But, dear Vritra, one must obey one's brother. So let me go.

VRITRA: Brother, I love you. But you'll not listen to me. So be it. I'll wait for you here outside..

(*Vritra stamps in exasperation, goes and strikes a worried pose. The audience loves it. Applause. Vishwarupa goes round the stage to indicate that he is covering a long distance.*)

ARVASU: (*Aside.*) Nittilai, I hadn't known it would be like this. I can feel the audience reaching out to me — their warmth coming in wave after wave, lapping against me. I'm good! Yet suddenly I don't care for this sea of smiling faces. I want yours. Where are you? Are you safe? My heart trembles to think of you.

(*Vishwarupa finishes the round and arrives at Indra's fire sacrifice.*)

VISHWARUPA: Brother Indra, now I enter your sacrificial pavilion.

INDRA: (*Laughs.*) Come, come. I shall welcome you properly. Come and sit by the altar and offer oblations to the gods.

(*Vishwarupa mimes sitting down and pouring oblations in the fire. Indra laughing silently, moves behind him, takes up his thunderbolt, takes aim and plunges it into Vishwarupa's back. Vishwarupa screams. Paravasu, who has been watching impassively until now, jumps to his feet. The Brahma Rakshasa appears next to him. The rest of the people on stage freeze.*)

PARAVASU: No. No. Wrong! That's wrong!

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: What's wrong?

PARAVASU: They understand nothing, the fools. Indra didn't mean to kill him —

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Then what happened?

PARAVASU: He was panic-stricken.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Why?

PARAVASU: He saw a face by the altar. Whose face was it? The face of my dead father? Or of my brother, who is a simpleton, yet knows everything? Or was it my own face? Cold fear tore through him. He stood paralysed. When he came to, he heard a voice asking: 'Who are you?' His own voice. There was no choice now but to go on, to strike. But to think that the fear had lain coiled inside him and he wasn't even aware —

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I see. Well, then. I must go.

PARAVASU: (*Startled.*) Go? Where?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I had better look elsewhere for help. You've enough problems of your own, Brother.

PARAVASU: I'll help you. I can.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Goodbye.

PARAVASU: Trust me. I'll help you —

(*The Brahma Rakshasa disappears. Paravasu shouts.*)

Come back — come back, Demon!

(*The stage, frozen till then, leaps to life. The audience, startled by Paravasu's shout, looks at him. Arvasu reacts to his brother's voice. Vishwarupa screams continuing his earlier scream. Rolls back. Indra strikes again.*)

VISHWARUPA: You, Brother? Why? I trusted you —

VRITRA: Whose voice is that? Familiar words!

(*Indra gives a villainous laugh.*)

VISHWARUPA: Brother, why this treachery?

VRITRA: Why, Brother? Why, why, why? Brother, why? Why? Indra's laughter — And why are the vultures, sparrows, kites and eagles reeling in such frenzy over the sacrificial sanctum? Why are they ripping the skies with their shrill screams? Why is a wave of blood breaking out of the sacrificial enclosure like a flock of fear-crazed jungle fowl?

(*He mimes entering the enclosure. Vishwarupa is dying.*)

VRITRA: Another treachery! Another filthy death! How long will this go on? How long will these rats crawl around my feet vomiting blood? I must put an end to this conspiracy — wait, Indra —

*(Attacks Indra with a ferocity which takes the Actor-Manager by surprise. They fight. The Actor-Manager is agile and well trained. But Vritra's violence shakes him. He runs. Vritra chases him.)*

VRITRA: You can elude me, Indra. But you can't escape me. Even if you fly like a falcon across ninety-nine rivers I'll find you. I'll destroy you. I'll raze your befouled sacrifice to the ground.

*(He pounces on a guard standing nearby and grabs a torch from his hand and rushes toward the real sacrificial enclosure.)*

I'll burn down the sacrifice —

ACTOR-MANAGER: No, no! Not *that* — stop him! Stop him, for God's sake —

*(Two or three guards try to stop Arvasu but he is uncontrollable. He swings his torch about and in a swift move, pulls out a dagger from a guard's belt. The guards, half scared, step back.)*

ARVASU: I am a Brahmin. If you try to stop me, I'll kill myself. And the sin of killing a Brahmin will be on your heads. I am a Rakshasa! And I'll kill anyone who tries to stop me —

*(He rushes into the sacrificial pavilion. The guards rush in after him. There is commotion.)*

ACTOR-MANAGER: It's the mask — it's the mask come alive. Restrain him — or there'll be chaos.

KING: Stop him! Stop him!

GUARD: *(Rushes out of the sacrificial enclosure.)* But he is not human, Sir. His feet don't touch the ground. He flies in the smoke like a Rakshasa — he disappears in the flames —

*(Suddenly the weak and hungry villagers watching the scene from the crowds get up and start rushing into the burning pavilion. There is a stampede.)*

BRAHMINS: It's the tribals — the savages — they're desecrating the sacrifice — Oh God! This is madness. The doomsday — they are eating and drinking the food kept for the gods. They're levelling the sacrifice to the ground —

KING: Chief Priest! Paravasu! What shall we do?

*(Paravasu has been watching the chaos, without so much as moving a muscle. He gets up and without a word calmly walks into the blazing enclosure.*

*Nittilai comes running.)*

NITTILAI: Arvasu!

*(She rushes into the burning structure. The crowds mill around. The structure, made of dry bamboo and wood bursts into flames. Nittilai comes out, supporting Arvasu. She takes off his mask, throws it away.)*

NITTILAI: It's all right. Don't worry now —

ARVASU: I don't know what came over me, Nittilai.

NITTILAI: It's all over. Thank God, you aren't hurt —

ARVASU: I lost, Nittilai. And Paravasu won. He went and sat there in front of the altar, unafraid and carried on with the sacrifice. I couldn't destroy him . . .

NITTILAI: You didn't mean to, Arvasu.

ARVASU: He went up in flames while I stood watching, untouched.

NITTILAI: It doesn't matter! Let's just go away from all this.

ARVASU: Yes, let us. Don't let go of me — please —

NITTILAI: Of course, I won't, silly boy. Come.

*(Suddenly Nittilai's brother and husband step out of the crowd and bar their way. She screams.)*

ARVASU: No! Listen — listen to me —

NITTILAI: Please, Brother — Husband — please, don't —

*(The brother knocks Arvasu down and pins him to the ground. The husband pulls out a knife, grabs Nittilai by her hair and slashes her throat in one swift motion. He then lets her drop. The two go away. Arvasu gets up, rushes to her, takes her in his arms. She lies there, her eyes open, bleeding, dying like a sacrificial animal. The commotion dies away as Arvasu stares numbly at Nittilai.)*

ARVASU: (*Softly.*) Serves you right! Who asked you to meddle with this world? You plunge in — like a lamp into a hurricane. What do you expect? No one'll weep for you, Nittilai. Not even me. I'll sing no lullaby of hate for you. But I'll come with you. Where nothing matters, not your goodness, nor my stupidity, nor this world's evil. Where the fire will have reduced everything to ashes.

*(He lifts up her corpse, puts it on his shoulder and goes into the sacrificial pavilion which is still burning. The crowds watch in silence. He goes and stands inside the burning structure. The fire slowly dies out.*

*Melodious music. The sunlight becomes soft and gentle. The entire atmosphere gets an ethereal hue. The voice of Indra is heard from the skies.)*

INDRA: Arvasu, son, do not grieve. We are pleased with you. Ask for any boon and it shall be granted.

ARVASU: (*Baffled.*) Who's that? Who's that?

INDRA: I am Indra, the Lord of Gods. Know that all the gods are pleased with you.

ARVASU: Indra? But what do I have to do with Indra? I didn't seek Indra, or any other god. Yavakri did. Paravasu did. I seek only Death. Why are you here?

INDRA: (*Laughs.*) You question the gods? Other mortals would be happy to receive —

ARVASU: But — what have I done to deserve this visit?

INDRA: We loved the way you challenged Indra and then pursued him . . . in the play. But it could also be because of Paravasu's sacrifice or Nittilai's humanity. You humans are free to construe the acts of gods as you wish. The point is we are here and you can ask for anything you want —

CROWDS: Rain! Arvasu, ask for the rains! Water —

ARVASU: (*Slowly.*) Lord Indra, I want Nittilai back. Alive. That's all I want in my life. Grant me that. Nittilai — my gentle Nittilai — I killed her. I want her back —

CROWDS: Water, Arvasu, ask for the rains!

INDRA: It's no great matter to bring Nittilai back to life. But once the wheel of Time starts rolling back, there's no saying where it'll stop. Along with Nittilai, others too may return to life — your brother Paravasu, your father, even Yavakri —

ARVASU: Yes, let them. Let them.

*(Strange music fills the air. The souls of Nittilai, Paravasu, Raibhya, Yavakri, Andhaka as well as a host of other dead people enter the stage silently and come close to Arvasu. He looks at them and calls out.)*

ARVASU: (*Happily.*) Nittilai! Nittilai! Brother! Father — and who are all the others, Lord?

INDRA: Those who died all over the earth at the same time as your family. If the wheel of Time rolls back they come back to life too —

ARVASU: Yes. Yes. Let the world be as it was —

INDRA: But then won't the entire tragedy repeat itself, Arvasu? How will it help anyone to go through all that suffering again?

ARVASU: No, it won't. Lord, I have been an ignorant fool all my life. My stupidity contributed to that tragedy — fuelled it on. But after all that I have been through, I'm wiser. I can now stop the tragedy from repeating itself. I can provide the missing sense to our lives —

INDRA: Are you sure?

ARVASU: Yes, I am.

INDRA: Well then —

(*At this moment a shout is heard from afar. It is the voice of the Brahma Rakshasa.*)

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Arvasu —

ARVASU: Who's that?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: It's me. The Brahma Rakshasa. Your father invoked me. He ordered me to kill Yavakri and I did. I have done my duty and now I wander lost, and in torment. Help me, Arvasu.

ARVASU: What do you want?

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I want release — release from this bondage. Your father gave me this life. We are brothers. So you must complete what your father couldn't — I want to melt away — I want peace — eternal peace — I beg of you — intercede on my behalf with the gods —

ARVASU: Lord Indra, you heard that. Could you —

INDRA: Arvasu, the wheel of Time must roll back if Nittilai is to return to life. It must roll forward for the Brahma Rakshasa to be released. You can't have it both ways. Choose —

ARVASU: (*Helplessly to the Brahma Rakshasa.*) You see, there's nothing I can do.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: You can, Arvasu. You can. Don't abandon me.

INDRA: There's another consideration, Arvasu. Not even the gods can guarantee a soul the ultimate release. That is a law beyond us. I may grant his release from birth and death because you ask for it. But there is every chance it may not

work. In that case, his situation will remain unchanged and you'll lose Nittilai.

ARVASU: You heard that, Brahma Rakshasa. So forgive me —

*(The souls draw closer to Arvasu, their eyes pleading with him.)*

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: I don't forgive. I can't. But you are a human being. You are capable of mercy. You can understand pain and suffering as the gods can't —

ARVASU: I don't want to listen to you. Go away! Go away!

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: And when Nittilai comes back what will you tell her? Will you tell her that because of her a soul writhes in pain —

ARVASU: Shut up! She is not at fault —

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Nittilai came to help you because she cared for you. She would have cared for me. Wept at the thought of my endless life in death. If you bring her back, you'll have destroyed what made her such a beautiful person —

ARVASU: That's not true.

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: Remember, Arvasu. If Nittilai lives again, she'll live a life as tormented as mine — tormented by the knowledge that her resurrection condemned me beyond salvation. And every moment of her life, she'll hear my screams. What you are asking for is not a boon. You are asking Indra to condemn Nittilai to a hell-hole much worse than the one I'm in. Think, Arvasu, you're wiser now —

*(Arvasu is silent. The souls make a strange moaning noise.)*

INDRA: Arvasu, have you decided?

ARVASU: Lord Indra —

INDRA: Yes —

ARVASU: Grant this Brahma Rakshasa his release. Let him go.

INDRA: You're sure you want that?

ARVASU: Nittilai would have wanted it so.

INDRA: Well then, so be it!

*(The Brahma Rakshasa cries out in triumph. A long pause. The crowd of souls gives a long, mournful sigh of disappointment and begins to withdraw. Nittilai's soul too goes away with them.)*

ARVASU: Nittilai!

*(Sits down and clutches Nittilai's corpse. The Brahma Rakshasa*

*waits impatiently but nothing happens. He looks around baffled, scared. The world seems to stand still.*

*The crowds begin to whisper.)*

CROWDS: What's that? — You smell that? — Yes. Yes. The smell of wet earth. Of fresh rains. It's raining. Somewhere. Nearby. The air is blossoming with the fragrance of earth. It's raining — It's raining — Rain! The rain!

*(Wind blows. Lightening. Thunder. People shout 'Rain! It's raining!' Suddenly the Brahma Rakshasa roars with laughter and melts away. Only his laughter can be heard for a few moments, reverberating, mixed with the rolling thunder. It pours. People dance with joy. They roll in the mud. Arvasu sits clutching Nittilai's body.)*

ARVASU: It's raining, Nittilai! It's raining!

# *Notes*

The following notes are appended at the suggestion of the Publisher.

## The Translation

*The Fire and the Rain* is a translation of my Kannada play, *Agni Mattu Malé*. English is the language of my adulthood: inevitably the translation is only an approximation to the original. But there is also another kind of loss.

'Agni' is the Sanskrit word for fire. And being a Sanskrit word, it carries, even when used in Kannada, connotations of holiness, of ritual status, of ceremony, which the Kannada word for fire ('benki') does not possess. 'Agni' is what burns in sacrificial altars, acts as a witness at weddings and is lit at cremations. It is also the name of the god of fire. Conversely, when a match is struck, a gas-burner is lit or when a house goes up in flames, you see 'benki'.

'Malé' is a Kannada word. It means rain, pure and simple. It has none of the aura of romance, mystery and grandeur that surrounds Sanskrit words for rain when used in Kannada.

'Mattu' means 'and'. It is usually left out in spoken Kannada.

Thus the phrase, *Agni Mattu Malé*, in addition to counterpointing two physical elements normally seen as antagonistic, also sets up several other oppositions: between an Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit) and a Dravidian (Kannada) language, between the pan-Indic and the regional points of view, between the classical 'marga' and the less exalted 'desi' traditions, between the elevated and the mundane, and even perhaps between (here one needs to tread cautiously) the sacred and the secular.

Nothing of this can come through in English — a despair not confined to the title.

So bearing in mind Robert Frost's maxim that poetry is what gets left out in a translation, we proceed.

## The Myth of Yavakri

There were two sages, Bharadwaja and Raibhya, who were good friends. Raibhya was a learned man who lived with his two sons while Bharadwaja concentrated on his ascetic practices. Yavakri,

Bharadwaja's son, nursed a grievance against the world for he felt his father did not receive the respect and recogniiion which was his due.

He therefore went off to the forest and did 'tapasya' (penance) so that he could obtain the knowledge of the Vedas from the gods direct. The rigours of his ascetic practice were such that Indra, the lord of gods, appeared to him, but only to persuade him that there were no such short cuts to knowledge. Knowledge has to be obtained by studying at the feet of a guru. But Yavakri was so adamant that Indra ultimately relented and let him have his wish.

Bharadwaja, being a wise man, was anxious lest the triumph turn his son's head and cautioned Yavakri against delusions of omnipotence. But his fears unfortunately proved well-founded. For one of the first things Yavakri did was to corner Raibhya's daughter-in-law in a lonely spot and molest her.

Yavakri's misdemeanour incensed Raibhya. He invoked the 'kritya' spirit. He tore a hair from his head and made an oblation of it to the fire. From it sprang a woman who looked exactly like his daughter-in-law. From another hair he similarly brought forth a rakshasa (demon). Then he sent the two to kill Yavakri.

The spirit in the form of the daughter-in-law approached Yavakri seductively and stole the urn which contained the water that made him invulnerable to danger. The rakshasa then chased him with a trident.

Yavakri ran toward a lake in search of water, but the lake dried up. Every spot with a bit of water in it dried up at his approach. Finally Yavakri tried to enter his father's hermitage. But a blind man of the Sudra caste, who was guarding the gate, barred Yavakri's entry. At that moment the rakshasa killed Yavakri.

When Bharadwaja learnt from the Sudra how his son had died, he was naturally distressed. Although he knew his son was to blame for all that had happened, he cursed Raibhya that he would die at the hand of his elder son. And then shocked at his own folly in cursing a friend, he entered fire and immolated himself.

Raibhya's two sons, Paravasu and Aravasu (spelt Arvasu in the play) were conducting a fire sacrifice for the king. One night when Paravasu was visiting his home, he mistook the black deerskin which his father was wearing for a wild animal and unintentionally killed him.

When he realized what he had done, he cremated his father and returned to the sacrificial enclosure. There he said to his brother Aravasu: 'Since you are not capable of performing the sacrifice alone,

go and perform the penitential rites prescribed for Brahminicide. I'll carry on with the sacrifice.'

Aravasu did his brother's bidding. But when he returned to the sacrifice, Paravasu turned to the king and said: 'This man is a Brahmin-killer. He should not be allowed to enter the sacrificial enclosures.'

The king promptly ordered his servants to throw Aravasu out, although the latter kept protesting loudly that he was innocent.

Aravasu retired to the jungle and prayed to the Sun God. When the gods appeared, he asked them to restore Yavakri, Bharadwaja and Raibhya back to life and make Paravasu forget his evil act. The gods granted him the boon. When Yavakri came back to life, the gods reprimanded him on his folly and asked him to pursue knowledge in the right manner.

## The Yajña: Fire Sacrifice

In Vedic thought, as in the Iranian tradition, there was a conception of the world as due not to a chance encounter of elements but as governed by an objective order, inherent in the nature of things, of which the gods are only the guardians . . . The sacrifice (yajña) is performed on behalf of an individual householder, technically called the sacrificer, accompanied by his wife, but all the ritual acts are performed by priests, varying in number from one to sixteen and ultimately seventeen officiants in the full . . . sacrifice . . . A special area is consecrated for each performance of a ritual and the sacrificer undergoes a consecration setting him apart from the profane world. In essence, the sacrifice can be regarded as a periodic ritual by which the universe is recreated, with the sacrificer like his prototype Prajapati incorporating the universe.

Indeed, the construction of the altar is conceived as a creation of the world from the basic elements of earth and water. In this cyclical process the gifts to the priests in attendance . . . came to be seen as the fee paid for the performance of the ritual . . . Originally, as indeed in the myth of the cosmic sacrifice of purusha (RV 10.90), the sacrifice was a sacrifice of the sacrificer himself and then successively of increasingly remote substitutes [like the horse, the ox, the sheep and then the goat and finally the rice-cake.][1]

[1] J.L. Brockington: *The Sacred Thread: A Short History of Hinduism*, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 34–5.

The expenses of a fire sacrifice are met by a king or a wealthy man (known only as the dikshita or yajamana) who arranges for one in order to obtain certain benefits: sons, cattle, wealth or even to postpone old age, avoid death, or 'shine in glory like the Adityas'.

There are four Chief Priests, each associated with a Veda and specializing in a particular branch of the ritual, helped by the other priests. The conduct of the participants is regulated by stringent rules. They cannot go outside the sacrificial precincts. They cannot indulge in sexual dalliance. They cannot speak to 'lower-caste' people, etc.

> There is one aspect of the idea of divinity in this period to which we should call particular attention, viz. its intimate association with what is described as rita. Rita which etymologically stands for 'course', originally meant 'cosmic order', the maintenance of which . . . is the purpose of all the gods; and later it also came to mean 'right', so the gods were conceived as preserving the world not merely from physical disorder but also from moral chaos . . .
>
> This [initially] simple form of worship became more and more complicated and gave rise, in course of time, to elaborate sacrifices as also to a special class of professional priests who alone, it was believed, could officiate at them.
>
> More noteworthy . . . was the change that came over the spirit with which offerings were made to the gods . . . What prompted the performance of sacrifices was no longer the thought of prevailing upon the gods to bestow some favour or to ward off some danger; it was rather to compel or coerce them to do what the sacrificer wanted to be done. This change of spirit is explained by many among modern scholars as importing of the magical element into Vedic religion and . . . as a sign of the transfer of power from the gods to the priests. [But it would seem more correct to see the power as] transferred from the gods not to the priests but directly to the Veda itself!
>
> It is this sacrificial correctness that constitutes the third meaning of rita . . . Ritualistic punctilio thus comes to be placed on the same level as natural law and moral rectitude.[2]

[2] M. Hiriyanna: *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy*, George Allen & Unwin, 1949, pp. 12, 16, 17.

## Yajña and Entertainment

The duration of a fire sacrifice varied and some stretched over years. The *Mahabharata* opens with a sacrifice that was to go on for twelve years.

The daily activity of a sacrifice is cyclical. And there are intervals between the ritual actions when the priests are free and can devote their time to other activities, not directly connected with the sacrifice.

Story-telling was an activity that often occupied the intervals between the actions of the rite. The whole of the *Mahabharata*, for instance, was narrated during such intervals between rites. The space could also be devoted to the performance of plays. In the last chapter of the *Natyashastra*, King Nahusha expresses his intention to arrange for dramatic performances at yajñas.

A Kannada reviewer of *The Fire and the Rain* based his entire analysis on the assumption that in the play, the yajña represented the sacred while the dramatic performance represented its secular counterpoint. This is not just simplistic. It is wrong. The *Natya-shastra* lists ten forms of theatre and some may have been secular. But no truly secular performance would be permitted as entertainment at a fire sacrifice.

## Indra

Indra is the king of gods, the lord of rains and the wielder of the thunderbolt.

> Indra was clearly the most popular deity among the poets of the Rigveda. . . , for almost a quarter of all the hymns are addressed to him. He is the dominant deity of the middle region, the region between the Earth and Heaven . . . A few [of the hymns] make him the son of Tvastri, the Great Father and Creator of all creatures . . . His chief characteristic, accorded unstinted praise, is his powers, both on the human plane as the god of battle . . . and mythologically as the thunder god who conquers the demons of drought and darkness, thus liberating the waters or winning the light.
>
> The most basic myth connected with Indra concerns his battle with the serpent Vritra, who is obstructing the waters and the sky . . . [3]

[3] Brockington, 1992, pp. 10–11.

## Indra and Vritra

The slaying of the demon Vritra by Indra is one of the archetypal myths of India. We find it in the *Rigveda*: it appears again, needless to say with variations, in the *Mahabharata* nearly a thousand years later. In the *Rigveda*, Vritra, 'the shoulderless one' (a serpent) swallows rivers and hides the waters inside him. Indra, by killing him, releases the waters and 'like lowing cows, the rivers flow out'. The importance of this deed to the Vedic culture is borne out by the epithet, 'Vritrahan' or the slayer of Vritra, by which Indra is repeatedly hailed. Yet a passing reference in the myth to how Indra, frightened, fled 'like a falcon across ninety-nine rivers' suggests that even the Rigvedic version probably had elements not entirely complimentary to Indra.[4]

> The exact nature of [the] liberation of the waters has given rise to much speculation. In the nineteenth century it was interpreted as bringing down rain . . . But the Vritra myth is now generally accepted as a creation myth with Vritra symbolizing chaos. . . .[5]

By the time we come to the version recorded in the *Mahabharata*, Indra has lost his central position in the Hindu pantheon. The sectarian gods, Vishnu and Shiva, now hold sway. In the later version of the myth, Indra is anxious that Vishwarupa (also called Trishiras, the three-headed one), son of Tvastri, may dislodge him from his throne. He therefore destroys Vishwarupa treacherously. Tvastri then gives birth to another son, Vritra, by a female demon, and tells him: 'Kill Indra'. Indra, unable to overcome the new enemy, again has to resort to ignominious trickery to survive. Having killed Vritra, he suffers from the guilt of Brahminicide.

The myth can be seen as expressing a deep anxiety which informs the whole of Indian mythology, the fear of brother destroying brother. This fear branches out fully and nakedly in the *Mahabharata*, where the bonding of brothers within the Pandava and the Kuru clans is as close as the enmity between the cousins is ruthless and unrelenting. In the *Ramayana*, the fraternal bonding in the Raghu family — Rama and his brothers — expresses another facet of the same anxiety, with the betrayals of Sugriva and Vibhishana

[4] Wendy O'Flaherty: *Hindu Myths*, Penguin, 1975, pp. 74–86.
[5] Brockington, 1992, p. 11.

(interestingly in the cause of the ethically correct side) marking the counterpoint.

The tale of Aravasu and Paravasu fascinated me as an unusual variant of this Indian obsession with fratricide and it seemed logical too that Yavakri should be their cousin, though the *Mahabharata* does not explicitly say so. I cannot remember when I decided to incorporate the Indra-Vritra legend in my plot, but years later, while re-reading the original version, I was astonished to find that right at the beginning of the tale of Yavakri, Lomasha mentions that the whole story took place on the banks of a river in which Indra had bathed to cleanse himself of the sin of killing Vritra! One of the fascinating aspects of dealing with myths is their self-reflexivity. A myth seems complete in itself and yet when examined in detail, contains subconscious signals which lead you on to another myth which in turn will act as a conduit to a third one while illuminating the one you started with.

## Yajña and Theatre

The fire sacrifice was a rite of such central importance in the Vedic society and so completely dominated the mode of thinking that it became the central metaphor, used to underline the importance of any activity. Thus the yajña metaphor has been employed while talking of academic study, love-making, the epics, marriage, indeed of life itself. One need hardly mention then that it is also a favourite metaphor for theatre. Kalidasa talks of theatre as the 'desirable fire sacrifice of the eyes' (*Kantam kratum chakshusham*).

The parallel is striking in so far as both activities involve human performances, precise gestures, speech, and a carefully worked out action leading to a predetermined denouement. But an additional characteristic common to both is the perennial possibility of disruption. The disruption may come from outside, either from a human agency (unruly audiences, mischief-mongers, intruders, those unable to understand what is happening, demons) or from a more general calamity (rain, storm, political upheavals). Or the source of disruption could be within: the performers may forget their lines, mispronounce words, or quite simply may not have prepared themselves properly for their roles.

To guard against the first two hazards, the yajña is performed inside a sacrificial enclosure, the play inside a theatre building. The third possibility is guarded against by the vigilance of the Chief Priest, the director, the *guru*.

The parallels are so close that many scholars[6] have argued that the steps by which the narrative of the Birth of Drama proceeds in the first chapter of the *Natyashastra* actually mirror the progression in similar myths about the yajña:

> Performance → disruption by demons → building of a protective enclosure → discussion → second performance inside the enclosure.

One of the principle differences between the two activities lay in the fact that drama was open to and became the prerogative of castes and communities excluded from the yajña. Abhinavagupta, a tenth-century critic, author of the only extant pre-modern commentary on the *Natyashastra*, brings home to us both this identity and difference when he explains that in the Prologue of a Sanskrit play the Sutradhara (Stage Manager) is addressed as 'Aryaputra' (a scion of an Arya family), although the actor is a Sudra by birth, because he is the host of the great sacrifice of the Natya Veda (*natyavedamahasattradikshita*).

## The Birth of Drama

The first chapter of Bharata's *Natyashastra* gives us the myth of the origin of drama. The chapter itself has been attributed to 500 BC though the other chapters of the book may be of later date.

It was a time when the moral fibre of the society had weakened, irrational passions held sway and people had surrendered themselves to their baser instincts. Knowledge of the Vedas (which presumably could have saved the situation) being restricted to the upper strata of the society, a medium was required that entertained and could restore the health of the society by reaching out to all the people, regardless of their position in the social hierarchy. On being implored by Indra and the other gods to provide such an instrument, Brahma, the Father of the Universe, took the text from the *Rigveda*, the art of performance from the *Yajurveda*, the song from the *Sāmaveda* and rasa (aesthetic experience) from the *Atharvaveda* and created a fifth Veda called the *Natyaveda*).

But Indra realized that the gods were unable (or unfit) to deal with this new form and passed it on to a human preceptor, Bharata.

[6] M. Christopher Byrsky: *Concept of Ancient Indian Theatre*, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1974, pp. 41–51; 76–90.

And Bharata, with the help of his hundred sons and some nymphs specially created by Brahma for the purpose, staged the first play.

The play was performed on the occasion of the Banner Festival, held to celebrate Indra's victory in a battle over the demons. The theme of the play was the victory of the gods over the demons, the event which the festival was meant to celebrate. This did not please the demons who were present. They took umbrage and using supernatural powers, 'paralysed the speech, movement as well as memory of the actors'. (Notice that the demons do not attack the actors physically but rather render the training they had received for performance ineffective.)

Indra, enraged by the mischief of the demons, laid into the demons with his thunderbolt, killing many. (Notice again that thus Indra, the god, re-enacts what Indra, in Bharata's play, was enacting in imitation of what Indra, the god, initially had done in battle.) But the demons persisted in their obstructive tactics.

At this point Bharata again approached Brahma, whose immediate reaction was to suggest that a theatre building should be built within which the performance could proceed uninterrupted. He placed the various gods at the vulnerable points of the building to ensure security. And then he addressed the demons on the nature of drama: 'In it (natya) there is no exclusive representation of you or the gods', he said, 'for the drama is a re-enactment of the state of the Three Worlds.'[7] Drama serves varied functions — providing for instruction, entertainment, enlightenment, happiness, peace and moral upliftment. It teaches one one's duty and relieves one's sorrow. There is no maxim, no learning, no art or craft that is not found in drama. For it is the joys and sorrows of human nature expressed through gestures and other techniques.

Then Brahma instructed Bharata to consecrate the stage for the next performance.

## Drama and the Purusharthas

The 'purusharthas' are the four ethical goals of human existence: 'dharma', 'artha', 'kama' and 'moksha'. Very roughly, 'dharma' relates to the spiritual sphere, 'artha' to the realm of political and economic

[7] M.M. Ghosh (tr.), *The Natyashastra*, The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1950 and 1961, p. 14. The word used by Dr Ghosh is 'representation'. But I prefer 're-enactment' as a translation of 'anukeertanam'.

power, and 'kama' to that of sexual or aesthetic gratification. In these cases, what a person understands as his or her 'purushartha' could vary according to his or her background, stage of and station in life, sex etc., as well as the nature of the crisis he or she is facing. The fourth goal, 'moksha', is release from the cycle of births and deaths and hence final liberation from human bondage. This is the supreme goal, the achievement of which relates the human being to the Absolute. The concept therefore belongs to a realm beyond where the first three are relevant. Thus the harmony of the first three may be seen as a means to realizing the fourth.

Abinavagupta states that drama should direct one's mind toward the realization of the purusharthas.

## The Nature of Drama

The opening chapter of the *Natyashastra*, as we saw, ends with Brahma telling Bharata to get ready for the next performance. It does not tell us whether this performance was any more successful, or at least less troublesome, than the first one. But that is the curious aspect of the myth. Here is the most ancient, most revered text on drama telling us about what was in fact the very first dramatic performance in history. The performance was the result of a collaboration between men and gods, working on a combination of the most appropriate elements drawn from the Vedas. The result should have been a resounding success, unmatched in the history of Time.

Instead, we are told the show was a disaster.

The last chapter of the *Natyashastra* — admittedly a later addition — tells us of another performance, again staged by the sons of Bharata. This time it is the Brahmins who are offended and they curse the actors to be outcastes. The Brahmanic tradition which handed down the *Natyashastra* does not concede that these irate Brahmins may have been as wrong in their understanding of drama as the demons were in chapter one. But it is significant that the *Natyashastra* is sandwiched between two performances, neither of which could be described as a success.

There is an implicit statement here about the nature of drama itself, which modern scholars have refused to look at: possibly, it embarrasses them. The point being made is that drama is a precarious, potentially disruptive, event. The possibility of being misunderstood is built into it because of its social character. Before it can be made to yield rasa or pleasure, all the parties need to undergo

rigorous and disciplined training. One has to train oneself to 'recognize' the form for what it is and appreciate its finer points.

Let me now quote a tale by one of the great story-tellers of our time as summarized by another story-teller, Umberto Eco, concerning drama.

> According to Jorge Luis Borges, Abulgualid Mohammed Ibn Ahmed Ibn Mohammahd Ibn Rushd, better known as Averroes, was thinking — something like one thousand years ago, more or less — about a difficult question concerning Aristotle's *Poetics*. As you probably know, Averroes was a specialist on Aristotle, mainly on the *Poetics*. As a matter of fact, Western civilization had lost this book and had rediscovered it only through the mediation of Arab philosophers. Averroes did not know about theatre. Because of the Muslim taboo on representation, he had never seen a theatrical performance. At least, Borges, in his short story, *The Quest of Averroes*, imagines our philosopher wondering about two incomprehensible words he had found in Aristotle, namely 'tragedy' and 'comedy'. A nice problem, since Aristotle's *Poetics* is nothing else but a complex definition of those two words, or at least of the first of them.
>
> [One day] Averroes is disturbed by some noise coming from downstairs. On the patio a group of boys are playing. One of them says, 'I am the Muezzin', and climbs on the shoulders of another one, who is pretending to be a minaret. Others are representing the crowd of believers. Averroes only glances at this scene and comes back to his book, trying to understand what the hell 'comedy' means.
>
> In [another] episode, Averroes and the Koranist Farach are talking with the merchant Albucasim, who has just come back from remote countries. Albucasim is telling a strange story about something he has seen in Sin Kalan (Canton): a wooden house with a great salon full of balconies and chairs, crowded with people looking towards a platform where fifteen or twenty persons, wearing painted masks, are riding on horseback, but without horses, are fencing, but without swords, are dying, but are not dead. They were not crazy, explains Albucasim, they were 'representing' or 'performing' a story. Averroes does not understand, and Albucasim tries to explain it: 'Imagine', he says, 'that someone *shows* a story instead of telling it.' 'Did they speak?' asks Farach. 'Yes, they did', answers Albucasim. And Farach remarks, 'In such a case they did not need so many persons. Only one teller can tell everything,

even if it is very complex.' Averroes approves. At the end of the story, Averroes decides to interpret the words 'tragedy' and 'comedy' as belonging to encomiastic discourse.

Averroes touched twice upon the experience of theatre, skimming over it without understanding it. Too bad, since he did have a good theoretical framework ready to define it.[8]

## Conclusion

Thirty-seven years is a long time to live with a myth for company. It inevitably grows and changes with one. Somewhere along the line I became aware that the shape of the myth I was dealing with had uncanny parallels with that of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*.

The plot naturally fell into three parts, like a trilogy, each part with its own central action and lead character. The first two parts opened with the protagonist returning home after a prolonged absence while the third part culminated, not in some dramatic event, but in a debate on human frailty and divine grace. Then there was the presence in both of a supernatural agency bent on avenging a crime.

These are of course only external similarities but the shape of a myth cannot be isolated from its meaning, and once I saw the parallel, I was irresistibly drawn to delve deeper into the *Oresteia* and then the rest of Aeschylus. A deeper appreciation of that joyous genius has been one of the major benefits I have personally derived from writing *The Fire and the Rain*.

G.K.

[8] Umberto Eco: 'Semiotics of Theatrical Performance' (source unknown to author).

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## THE FIRE AND THE RAIN

**Girish Karnad**

*The Fire and the Rain* is based on a little-known myth from the *Mahabharata*. The narrative is centred round a seven-year long fire sacrifice designed to persuade the gods to send rain, and sweeps through seduction, murder and betrayal to a climax which is as unexpected as it is philosophically resonant. The play was commissioned by the prestigious Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, USA, and has been recently made into a motion picture.

**Girish Karnad** is a Padma Bhushan and was awarded the Bharatiya Jnanpith, India's highest literary prize, in 1999.

*Excerpts from reviews*

'[Karnad] has an awesome command over his dramatic material, [and] creates chaos through this clash between ritual, reality and drama…. This play…should be enacted under the open sky…[with] the locations of jungle, the awesome colour and chanting of sacrifice…' — *The Book Review*

'[Karnad] is India's best living playwright, [whose] journey from *Yayati* to *The Fire and the Rain* holds a mirror to the very evolution of…a truly "Indian" theatre, …which can be true to its traditions and at the same time responsive to contemporary concerns.' — *Hindu*

'The play is relevant to the times and transcends barriers of language and constraints of a given culture, to blossom into a drama with universal appeal.' — *Indian Express*

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